

LIVING IN EGYPT



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EGYPT

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I. THE HOUSE

BROKERS

DURING our first year in Cairo Mary and I lived in a flat. This flat was on the fifth floor of a building in the middle of Cairo and was in many ways unsatisfactory. I didn't like it because the lift was usually out of order; Abdel Rehim didn't like it because he considered the address insufficiently distinguished; and Mary didn't like it because she wanted to live in a little house with a garden.

Although I entirely sympathized with Mary's desire for a little house with a garden we discovered, when we came actually to look for one, that such residences were very rare. We made extensive searches and more extensive inquiries, but all the little houses we heard of were already occupied. Mary and I grew increasingly despondent. We looked at our flat with hatred and contempt, and at length desperately resolved to buy a piece of land and create a little house for ourselves.

In Egypt business is very keen. Merely to think about land is enough to make a broker prick up his ears. Actually to resolve to buy causes him immediately to appear before you. A broker accordingly waited upon me at my office. He was a large, dusky broker called Shenouda, and he wore a large waistcoat and a gold

THE HOUSE

watch-chain. His manner was intimate and mysterious, and I decided at once that I did not like Mr. Shenouda. Mr. Shenouda, however, sat down and leaned forward confidentially.

"You are thinking," he whispered, raising his fat forefinger to his thick lips, "of buying a piece of land?"

I admitted guardedly that this was so. Mr. Shenouda placed his hand upon his heart.

"Shenouda," he said majestically, "is a man of honour. In Cairo you will find many brokers who are men of no principle, but Shenouda is different. Shenouda's heart will not permit him to tell a lie. Money, to Shenouda, is nothing. If it comes Shenouda is pleased; if it does not come he smiles and says 'never mind—at least I have my honour!' To Shenouda honour is everything. His heart," he thumped his chest, "will not permit him to tell a lie."

Such was the energy with which Mr. Shenouda had vindicated his honour that little beads of sweat began to stand out on his brow. I had not warmed to Mr. Shenouda, but I had weakened. I had imperceptibly ceased to be a man thinking about buying land. I had become a client of Mr. Shenouda. I described to Mr. Shenouda the position of the piece of land. He affirmed that he was familiar with it—had even had that very piece in mind as he came up the stairs. It was a good piece of land in an excellent position. He complimented me upon my discrimination.

Mr. Shenouda now warned me that no time must be lost. This particular piece of land was naturally a great bargain and he personally knew of several other men who were eager to purchase it. However, if he went

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at once to the owner with a firm offer we might just succeed. We discussed the meaning of the term "firm offer" and Mr. Shenouda eventually convinced me that his definition was the correct one. But as he rose to go I had a sudden idea. I suggested to Mr. Shenouda that before actually closing the deal it would be prudent for the owner and myself to meet on the site, in order that there should be no uncertainty as to which piece of land was being purchased. Mr. Shenouda did not like this idea. He was afraid that the loss of time might prejudice our chance of buying. As I insisted, however, he reluctantly agreed to a rendezvous that afternoon.

If the resolve to buy land will summon one broker, a visit to the actual site will call up half a dozen. When I arrived to keep my appointment I found a small crowd gathered on the plot. The only person missing was the owner himself. After several heated references to his heart and a brief denunciation of all other brokers, Mr. Shenouda admitted that he had been unable to find the owner. The six other brokers seized me simultaneously by the lapel. They were all on intimate terms with the owner. Some of them, it appeared, were even his near relations. Each of them had a heart which would not permit him to lie, and they all without exception preferred honour to money. Seeing three more brokers hastening towards us down the road I became desperate. I heartily regretted my impulse to buy land. I tore myself away from the six.

"To-morrow morning," I cried bitterly, "I shall be in my office. Let the strongest among you bring me

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the owner." I retreated to my car. When I looked back the brokers had disappeared in a cloud of dust.

The next morning I went to my office as usual. The entrance was blocked by brokers. Brokers were surging round the door, brokers were swarming up the stairs. I entered secretly by a side door and gained my private room. I decided to tell my clerk to inform the brokers that I had changed my mind—that I was too busy to see them. I turned round with a sigh of relief and was greeted effusively by Mr. Shenouda. Mr. Shenouda reassured me at some length as to his honour and as I listened I gradually dwindled once more into a client. He confided to me that though he had not found the owner himself he had found the owner's lawyers, who would act for him. He had already made an appointment with the lawyers and it would be wise to go without delay. But as we turned to the door it burst suddenly open and admitted fourteen other brokers, sweeping my clerk backwards before them. The fourteen simultaneously expressed their love of honour and indifference to money and confided to me that they also had found the lawyers who would act for the owner.

Accompanied by my fifteen brokers I proceeded to the office of the lawyers. With the assistance of my fifteen brokers I discussed with the lawyers the matter of the piece of land. We fixed the price and we examined the title-deeds. The boundaries as stated on the title-deeds did not appear to accord with my recollection of the boundaries of the piece of land itself. The fifteen brokers assured me that I was

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mistaken, but I was obdurate. I insisted on seeing the actual land.

Accompanied by the lawyers and my fifteen brokers, and two more brokers whom we picked up on the stairs, I proceeded to the piece of land. I pointed it out to the lawyers. They expressed surprise. It was not this piece, but the next piece, which belonged to their client.

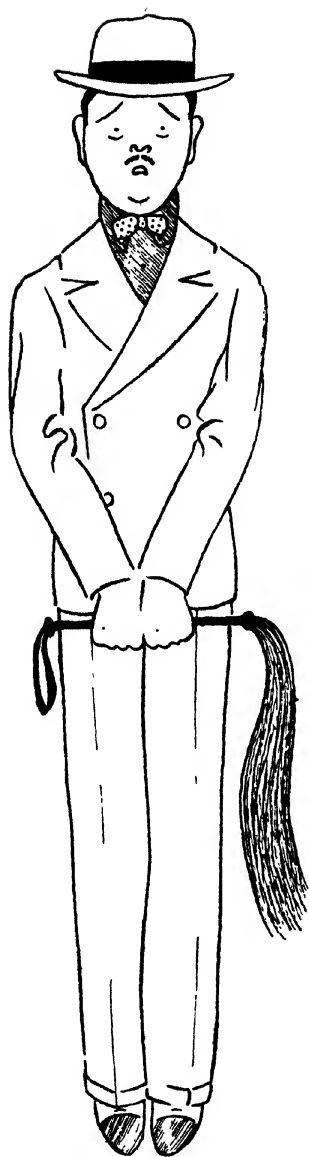
I was delighted. I felt strong and defiant. Mr. Shenouda no longer had power over me. The others filled me with hatred and contempt. I turned to my seventeen brokers. I thumped my chest.

"Honour," I cried, "is everything! Money and land are dross. I do not wish to buy land. I have changed my mind. My heart will not permit me to tell a lie." I escaped in my car.

THE ENGLISH COLONEL

After my experience with Mr. Shenouda and his honourable colleagues, Mary and I gave up the idea of buying land and reverted disconsolately to our search for a small house and garden which we could rent. And after protracted inquiries we heard of a house, a little outside Cairo, which was about to be vacated by an army couple. Mary and I lost no time. Terrified lest the disinterested Mr. Shenouda might even now intervene in the affair on a five per cent. basis, we called upon the army couple, saw the house, liked it and set off to find the landlord all on the same day.

Monsieur Joachim, when found, proved to be a Jew, a debonair and portly man with a fringe of red hair like a halo, which gave him something of the air of a bald saint. Finding us indiscreetly eager to rent his house he himself became proportionately coy. He spoke of the amenities of his house with the easy hyperbole of an English House Agent, and mentioned an exorbitant rent in the mild and munificent tone of a philanthropist selling caviare at a loss. But when we had at length come to an agreement with him he grew confidential. He was glad, he said, that we were English. The English were the best tenants and all his tenants, from the date when the house was built in 1912, had been English. The founder of this



"Monsieur Joachim . . . a debonair and portly man . . ."

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distinguished line, he added with a certain reminiscent regret, had been an English colonel.

As we became better acquainted with Monsieur Joachim we found that this eminent predecessor of ours began to play an unexpectedly important part in our lives. The English colonel, in the eyes of Monsieur Joachim, was the type of the perfect tenant. So amenable, so gentlemanly, so intolerably priggish and cringing was this colonel that we soon ceased to believe in him, and preferred to regard him as something monstrous and outside nature, the tenant in a paradise of landlords. Indeed such subservience, such altruistic disregard of rights and convenience, was above, or below, humanity. This colonel was our bugbear, the scorpion with which Monsieur Joachim was wont to chastise us, the insufferable good boy whose example was always being held up for our emulation. He was a bachelor, and his views on interior decoration coincided exactly with those held by Monsieur Joachim. In any matter concerning the arrangement of the garden Monsieur Joachim was the amiable mentor and the colonel the grateful and obedient pupil. The intolerable colonel used to ask Monsieur Joachim to tea; the fatuous and weak-kneed colonel used to agree with Monsieur Joachim that tenants should pay the landlords' tax; the renegade and malevolent colonel even used to suggest that his rent be raised.

For a year, nevertheless, we tolerated the Colonel. In spite of the colonel the house, and particularly the garden, suited us very well. But with the advent of a daughter and her attendant nanny the situation changed. The house continued to suit us very well, but it would

THE ENGLISH COLONEL

have suited us very much better if it had been larger. Accordingly I approached Monsieur Joachim and suggested that he might consider building a second storey. Monsieur Joachim, backed by the colonel, was up in arms at once. He and the colonel were astonished, and even a little hurt. A second storey would detract from the beauty of the property. All the other tenants had been satisfied with one storey. The colonel, indeed, had gone so far as to say openly that had he had six children he would never have dreamed of a second storey. But I persisted in my desire for a second storey. In direct defiance of the colonel I suggested that a second storey would not only add to the splendour of the house, but would also improve its amenities and increase its value.

This aspect of the case was not entirely lost upon Monsieur Joachim. He considered it at some length and presumably referred the matter to the opinion of the colonel. Eventually he and the colonel came to an agreement and reluctantly consented to the building of a second storey if I would pay for it. I was astonished in my turn. I maintained that the proposal was monstrous and unreasonable. I even threatened to leave the house altogether, and hinted darkly that the supply of English tenants was dwindling every year. Monsieur Joachim was impressed. He sighed over the obstinacy of tenants who were not willing to leave well alone, and agreed to pay a third of the cost. I was not satisfied. I led Monsieur Joachim into the garden and pointed menacingly to the new block of flats which was in process of construction farther down the road. Monsieur Joachim was more

THE HOUSE

impressed. He turned a little pale and agreed to pay half the cost.

The second storey was built and we lived for a time in great satisfaction and comfort. We felt that we had definitely turned the tables on the colonel. We boasted that the colonel could not survive this signal defeat. In our pride we even began to regard the colonel as a slight man.

And then, one day at the Club, we were introduced to an elderly man of austere and military appearance. We learned that this stranger was a colonel who had recently returned to Cairo and was looking for a flat. We conversed with the colonel, discussing the scandal of rents and the iniquities of landlords. At length, growing more intimate, we were emboldened to tell him about our landlord and *our* legendary colonel. But the colonel was not amused. He indignantly scouted the very idea of such a colonel, and was horrified at our weakness in agreeing to contribute a penny towards the construction of our second storey. He recalled that many years ago he had had a blackguard of a landlord himself—an impudent blustering feller who wanted to ask a high rent and do nothing for it. But the colonel gave him short shrift. He obliged the scoundrel to reduce the rent; he refused utterly to pay the landlords' tax; he forced the blighter to re-decorate the entire house from top to bottom, and when the villain started to give his infernal opinion about the colour of the paint and the arrangement of the garden he put him outside the door, by the lord.

The colonel reddened with reminiscent indignation, and we thought with shame of our discreditable weak-

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ness with Monsieur Joachim. By way of turning the conversation into a smoother channel we asked the colonel where he used to live. After some thought the colonel recollected the street and even the number. His eye kindled as he recalled his ancient battles and he wondered whether the house still belonged to a poisonous feller called Joachim.

2. HOUSE-KEEPING

THE KEY

WHEN Mary first joined me in Egypt the older residents kindly gave her several pieces of advice, the most unanimous being that she must not trust Berberine servants. They admitted openly that their own cooks were thieves and their *suffragis* liars, and spoke with pride of the formidable locks which guarded their store-cupboards. She gathered that no expert house-wife ever paid her cook more than half the sum he maliciously pretended to have spent in the market, or failed to subject his market basket to an examination so meticulous that it extended to counting the peas.

Mary was naturally much impressed by the opinions of these experienced friends. She passed their advice on to me.

"What," she said, "did you use to do about Abdel Rehim before we were married?"

I admitted guiltily that in my bachelor days I had, in point of fact, done nothing about Abdel Rehim. Abdel Rehim had led a happy, care-free life with his accounts unsupervised and the accuracy of his statements untested. But I also admitted that this system had no doubt been very wrong, and that now that I had

a wife to help me I was ready to start distrusting Abdel Rehim immediately.

Abdel Rehim, however, did not lend himself readily to this experiment.

He was a dignified and elderly man, with high cheekbones and an ascetic face, and his manner to us was courteous and somewhat fatherly. Although we told each other that, being both cook and *suffragi*, he must be a liar *and* a thief, our tone lacked conviction. We thought it wise to start distrusting him in a small way. We felt that if we could establish the principle of having a locked store-cupboard it would be easy to advance later to halving the accounts and computing the peas.

We accordingly installed a store-cupboard and, in somewhat deprecatory tones, explained its uses to Abdel Rehim.

"Every morning," we said, "you will attend the *sitt*, who will unlock the cupboard and give you what may be necessary."

Rather to our surprise Abdel Rehim made no objections to the new system. His attitude towards it was courteous and non-committal, and might have been regarded either as respect for our able housewifery, or as toleration for a childish game. We preferred the first interpretation and became proud of our distrust. We even began to admit to later comers than ourselves that our Abdel Rehim was a thief and a liar.

The only difficulty connected with the store-cupboard was the disposal of the key. The lock was as formidable as the most suspicious housewife could desire, and the key was large in proportion. It was

THE KEY

not practicable to carry it about either in my pocket or in any of Mary's numerous handbags. We were obliged to hide it. After reviewing a number of possible places we hid it under some papers in one of the drawers of Mary's desk, and as nothing ever disappeared from the cupboard it was safe to assume that this hiding-place was unknown to Abdel Rehim. Nevertheless, as time went on and we became more experienced in distrust, we began to be afraid that Abdel Rehim, thief and liar as he was, might suspect its whereabouts, and we changed the place. To keep Abdel Rehim off the scent we made a practice of changing the place fairly frequently, at cunningly irregular intervals.

And at last a day came when Mary hid the key hurriedly and forgot where it had been concealed. We searched in all the unlikely places, in all the likely places and even, as a last resort, in some of the obvious places; but when Abdel Rehim attended the *sitt* to draw the daily necessities it still had not been found.

Abdel Rehim waited in patient silence for the *sitt* to open the cupboard, while we looked at each other guiltily and sought for a form of words which would explain the loss without admitting the blame.

"Listen, Abdel Rehim," I said at last, "a serious thing has occurred. The key of the store-cupboard is not in its usual place."

Abdel Rehim evinced no surprise. Neither did he start in the manner of an evil-doer who has been caught red-handed. He looked at us with the reproachful eye of a kindly nurse whose patience has been much tried.

"It has long been my wish," he said in a tone of

HOUSE-KEEPING

gentle rebuke, "to speak to *ganab el sitt* on this matter of the key. At first it was very well. It remained always in the second drawer of the desk. Then it was moved to the small cupboard in *ganabkum's* bedroom. Recently it had been placed under a cup in the china cabinet, but yesterday the *sitt*, being pressed for time, left it beneath the visiting cards in the bowl on the hall table. This is not a good thing. A day may come when Abdel Rehim will not be able to remind the *sitt* where she left the key. It would be better, for the sake of safety, to leave it with Abdel Rehim."

As it is not practical to permit an untrustworthy servant to supervise the manner in which he is distrusted we agreed.

ACCOUNTS

A more serious problem than the store-cupboard was afforded by the institution known as Abdel Rehim's Book. This volume, written in English by a professional scribe, purported to contain an accurate record of all Abdel Rehim's purchases in the market, with the price of each item clearly stated. Mary examined this book weekly and conscientiously read through the daily lists, written in licked blue pencil and containing such items as:

	Piastres.
Soul	32
Kolliflower	3
Potates	1½
Pipper	1
Tram	2½

As compared with the works produced by the cooks of more experienced house-keepers this book read like the biography of a spendthrift, but as Mary had no means of checking the amount which Abdel Rehim had actually spent in the market it was difficult to make any definite accusations. And in reply to complaints of a general nature Abdel Rehim would say that he had at once recognized in Mary a lady who would be satisfied with nothing but the best; that articles of this superior

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quality were rare and consequently expensive, and that if Mary had any doubt as to the accuracy of the prices charged she had only to refer to the book, where they were clearly written down in black and white.

Mary, however, was not satisfied with these plausible explanations and one day, in order to prove the duplicity of Abdel Rehim, she decided to visit the market in person. I said that this plan was futile. That Mary in the Cairo market would be like a sheep before the shearers and that the extortions of the market would make the gentle tribute levied by Abdel Rehim pale into insignificance. Mary, however, persisted in her plan and one morning when Abdel Rehim had been instructed to buy a pound of steak, she went secretly to the market and also bought a pound of steak. And when Abdel Rehim produced his book at the end of the week she found that she had paid five piastres less for her steak than Abdel Rehim claimed to have paid for his.

Mary was very triumphant. With all the sarcasm at her command she pointed out to Abdel Rehim that if he was not over-charging her he was credulously permitting himself to be grossly swindled in the market. Pressing home her advantage she also said that of the cooks in Cairo, Abdel Rehim was the most extravagant, and that in future she would be obliged to supervise the house-keeping herself with the most relentless severity.

Abdel Rehim was deeply shocked. So unexpected was Mary's outburst that for once words failed him, and he could not even defend himself. He retired in

ACCOUNTS

dismay to the pantry, to all intents and purposes a broken man.

Mary and I were rather pleased. We saw ourselves joining the circle of the experienced elect and smiling in indulgent reproof at those new-comers who were not as firm with their servants as we. And rather to our surprise Abdel Rehim himself seemed to see us in this flattering light. When he emerged from the pantry he was no longer the dignified cook, consciously master of his craft, who went to the market in proud independence with a boy to carry his basket. He was now a humble fellow, eager to please, but entirely dependent upon Mary and incapable of making suggestions or of buying even a pinch of salt without definite instructions.

This new humility was very gratifying to the pride, and allowed Mary to exercise an iron control over the purchases made in the market on our behalf. But it had one serious defect. At the end of the first week we found that the total of the weekly account, instead of being notably reduced, was far greater than it had ever been before. Mary and I were outraged. We summoned our humble servitor and expressed to him indignantly our extreme dissatisfaction. Abdel Rehim bowed his head. He said that although, the *sitt* being already angry, he had not liked to make any remark, he himself had been most uneasy about the increased expenses. But the *sitt*, by her own wish, now did all the ordering without his advice and if, with an aristocratic disregard for the time of year, she ordered commodities which were out of season it was inevitable that the expenses should be higher. Would

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it not be better, he suggested, with a gleam of the master cook in his eye, if in future he assisted the *sitt* in her economies by advising her daily what articles it would be expedient to purchase?

Mary was rather reluctant to accept this suggestion. She had an uneasy feeling that this was not the manner in which the experienced housewife maintained an iron discipline in the kitchen. On the other hand, if Abdel Rehim was really prepared to turn over a new leaf it seemed a pity to quell his new-born ardour. We discussed the matter privately in all its aspects and eventually a compromise was arranged. Mary continued to do the daily ordering without Abdel Rehim's advice but granted Abdel Rehim the right, without any power of veto, respectfully to disapprove of certain of her selections. By this means everybody was satisfied. Mary retained all the panoply of power essential to the dignity of a practised housewife, Abdel Rehim was able to re-engage the boy who carried his basket to the market and the weekly account was soon reduced to its former level.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Another of Mary's early troubles was the question of the language. Arabic is difficult to learn, more difficult to pronounce, and written backwards entirely in consonants, but opinion in Egypt is unanimous that to address a servant in English is immediately to forfeit his respect. Accordingly we agreed that, although Mary knew no Arabic and Abdel Rehim had contemptuously learned a little English from some previous employer, she must converse with him, from the beginning, solely in Arabic.

Owing to the great experience of Abdel Rehim this arrangement worked admirably. Every morning at breakfast Mary made a list of the nouns and imperatives necessary to express her orders for the day. After breakfast Abdel Rehim was summoned and Mary recited in a loud voice Arabic phrases meaning "clean the drawing-room," "bring veal for lunch," or "air the beds." Abdel Rehim listened with an expression of strained anxiety. He was eager to co-operate with Mary in her attempts at communication, but too polite to hurt her feelings by admitting that her words meant nothing to him. When she had concluded her discourse he retired to the kitchen and after a period of thought did whatever appeared to him to be necessary or pleasing.

HOUSE-KEEPING

After a time, however, Abdel Rehim's ear became accustomed to the vagaries of Mary's pronunciation and Mary, growing proud of her new fluency, began to do without her list. But here a difficulty arose. Abdel Rehim could understand what Mary said, but Mary said the wrong things. Her nouns acquired special meanings of their own. "Serve lunch in the cupboard," she would say firmly. "Fill the vases with tea." "Fry the flowers." With a lesser man than Abdel Rehim this new development might well have led to chaos in the household. But Abdel Rehim is a servant of courtesy and intuition. He decided that if a word which he was accustomed to regard as meaning "flowers" signified "fish" to Mary, then Mary evidently had at her disposal sources of information inaccessible to the less educated and that Mary, therefore, was right.

In this manner, as Mary grew more confident and Abdel Rehim more adept in interpretation, a new language was gradually evolved, sounding superficially like Arabic, but properly comprehensible only to Abdel Rehim and the mistress of the house. And although I pointed out to Mary that as she was in any case learning a foreign tongue she might just as well learn one that was more generally current she waved my protests aside. She maintained with some show of reason that if the respect of Abdel Rehim could be won by talking Arabic it would clearly be greatly enhanced by the creation of an entirely new form of speech, and argued less cogently that since she talked Arabic only to Abdel Rehim it did not matter if nobody else could understand her.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

It didn't matter until Abdel Rehim, being but mortal, became suddenly indisposed on the day on which we had invited the Robinsons to dinner. The Robinsons were not intimate friends, but strangers to whom we wished to do honour and so, rather than put them off, we hastily replaced Abdel Rehim for the day by a regent called Hassan. Although this Hassan seemed reliable and obedient Mary was naturally anxious that the dinner should be all that the Robinsons could expect. She accordingly gave Hassan her orders with great precision and enjoined him straitly to depart in no particular from her instructions. Then, somewhat reassured by the imperturbability of Hassan's demeanour, she went out with an easy mind.

In the evening the Robinsons arrived in excellent appetite and Robinson, who is something of a hard-eating man, took pains to compliment us, with agreeable anticipation, upon our Abdel Rehim's reputation as a chef. As Robinson was not personally acquainted with Abdel Rehim we did not tell him that the part, that evening, was being taken by an understudy. We replied to his encomiums with a graceful deprecation and trusted that Hassan would justify them. And in fact the quality of the cooking was eminently worthy of Abdel Rehim himself. The only difficulty was to convince Robinson, whose character is austere rather than whimsical, that a meal which he would have described as consisting of fried pomegranate seeds followed by pigs' trotters in garlic would have been more properly defined, according to Mary's version of the Arabic language, as prawns in aspic and roast turkey.

TURKEY FOR TEN

In the East, even the Near East, it is seldom wise to interfere with traditional customs, and in Abdel Rehim's case a custom was apt to become traditional very rapidly, as soon, in fact, as it had passed muster on more than one occasion.

As the years passed Abdel Rehim succeeded in establishing to his own advantage many traditional customs, but the first and most inviolable of them was his right to buy the Christmas turkey. To Abdel Rehim Christmas was pre-eminently an eating festival and one, therefore, for which he had a peculiar sympathy and understanding. The act of buying the turkey was thus not only unusually profitable in itself—experience having shown that no one was likely to question too closely the price of this particular commodity—but it allowed the buyer to take, as it were, an active part in the rite, and the privilege was much esteemed from its sacrificial aspect.

For several years Abdel Rehim assisted regularly at the family celebrations and then a friend of ours who lived in the Fayoum, a district justly noted for turkeys, conceived a singularly unhappy idea.

"Why," he said to us, "get your turkey in Cairo, when I can send you a far better one from the Fayoum at about a quarter of the price?"

TURKEY FOR TEN

Mary and I were at first inclined to scout this idea as being entirely out of the question. But we were reluctant to admit to an outsider that we didn't dare suggest such a plan to our own servant, and we knew that a turkey from the Fayoum would certainly be better than one from the Cairo market. So we eventually fell in with the scheme, only stipulating that the bird must be a very large one, enough for ten people.

"Don't you worry," said our friend heartily, "I'll see to that, and I'll have it delivered on the twenty-third."

At first we said nothing of this to Abdel Rehim. We knew that he would disapprove and we ignobly deferred breaking the news until the last possible moment. We postponed our confession, in fact, until Abdel Rehim himself asked how many guests there would be for the feast, in order that he might gauge the size of turkey required.

"Oh, the turkey!" we said with a forced casualness, "we quite forgot to tell you, Abdel Rehim, that a friend of ours is kindly sending us one from the Fayoum. So you won't have to buy one at all this year. They're so much cheaper in the Fayoum," we added, in a weak and foolish attempt to soften the blow.

We watched Abdel Rehim's expression change from courteous attention to astonishment, from astonishment to disapproval and from disapproval to wounded pride.

"As *ganabkum* please," he said quietly, and walked with reproachful dignity from the room.

A day or two later the Fayoum turkey arrived in a large parcel, which we handed to Abdel Rehim

unopened, feeling guilty and ashamed. Abdel Rehim received the turkey in hurt silence and put it, still unopened, into the ice-chest. On Christmas Eve, however, he asked us to accompany him to the kitchen, and there was a subtle difference in his manner which made us look at each other with a dim foreboding.

"It is true, *ganab el sitt*, is it not," he asked Mary, "that there will be ten persons for the feast to-morrow?"

"Of course it's true," said Mary in surprise.

"Then," said Abdel Rehim with quiet triumph, "what am I to do?" He removed a cloth from a dish on the kitchen table and revealed, lying in horrid nakedness, a meagre bird having the appearance of a large and athletic hen. "This," he pointed at it with contempt, "is the turkey which *ganabkum* brought from the Fayoum, and it is not enough for ten people."

We looked at the bird in consternation. It certainly was by no means enough. We thought evil thoughts of our friend, who had so conspicuously let us down, and we turned in despair to Abdel Rehim.

"What is to be done?" we cried. "It is already late in the day, and to-morrow is the feast itself!"

Abdel Rehim smiled the aloof and forgiving smile of a prophet who has at last been received in his own country. "If *ganabkum* will that I do so," he said tolerantly, "I can still go to the market and search for a turkey of sufficient size. It will unfortunately be very expensive at so late an hour and most difficult to find. But the guests must not be disappointed."

Abdel Rehim departed on his mission and Mary and I returned thoughtfully to the drawing-room. We pointed out to each other that our friend in the Fayoum

TURKEY FOR TEN

was usually a careful and conscientious man, and we lamented that the matter of our turkey should be the exception which proved the rule.

On Christmas morning Abdel Rehim invited us to inspect his purchase. He displayed with pride a magnificent turkey—an opulent and enormous turkey, sufficient in itself to satisfy twelve people. We expressed astonishment that such a bird should still have been on the market but Abdel Rehim pointed out to us that it had a toe missing from one foot. Such, he explained, was the fastidious discrimination of the cooks of Cairo that the sacrificial bird must be perfect in every respect. He himself, he added, would indignantly have rejected such a turkey had the emergency been less pressing, particularly as the vendor, taking malicious advantage of the situation, had demanded an exorbitant price.

Christmas dinner, in spite of the missing toe, proved a great success. The praises of our guests consoled us for the price we had paid for the turkey, and Abdel Rehim waxed proud in the fragrance of public esteem.

A few days after Christmas we heard from our friend in the Fayoum. "I trust," he wrote, "that you didn't find your turkey *too* big. The man I got it from explained that its enormous corpulence was due to a missing toe, which had prevented it from exercising."

3. THE GARDEN

AWAD

IF our house was haunted by the spirit of the English colonel our garden was brooded over by Awad the gardener. Awad was a little, truculent man with a large moustache, and when Mary and I first assumed overlordship he received us with the qualified loyalty of a turbulent baron towards a potentially weak king. Whenever we went out to survey our new province he accompanied us in suspicious and hostile silence, as if every flower-bed were a castle which we might require to be razed to the ground; and when we asked for flowers for the house he took the view that we were demanding tribute and said that they were all required for seed. Relations were further complicated by the fact that Mary's special Arabic was at first entirely incomprehensible to Awad, and she was obliged to employ Abdel Rehim as an interpreter. And since Abdel Rehim and Awad did not get on, Mary's mild requests and recommendations, when transmitted through this medium, had a way of growing into ferocious and unreasonable commands, accompanied by menaces and insults.

For these reasons the garden remained for some time a place where our fiat ran only intermittently, and

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Awad used to divide his time between muttering discontentedly to himself behind the potting shed and exercising an unnerving capacity for appearing suddenly beside us when we thought he was elsewhere. And since Awad could always demonstrate the accuracy of his own opinions by seeing to it that no seed of which he disapproved ever came up, we grew despondent about the garden. We thought that the power of Awad would always prevail.

And then, suddenly, there came a plague of caterpillars. These caterpillars attacked the lawn and reduced it to a brown wilderness, and Awad was helpless against them. He regarded them as a visitation from God, and said that there was nothing to be done. But Mary and I were not satisfied with this fatalism. We thought that if we could demonstrate our superior resource in this matter of caterpillars, Awad's heart would be softened. Accordingly we set about eliminating the caterpillars ourselves. Under the cynical and contemptuous eye of Awad we applied our remedies to the caterpillars, and to the great satisfaction of Awad the caterpillars multiplied exceedingly. Mary and I were in despair. We tried other remedies. We read books about caterpillars. We took counsel with our friends, and at last we determined to invoke the Ministry of Agriculture.

Proud of the boldness of this scheme we went into the garden. We summoned Awad.

"Go," we said to him with an assumed lightness, "and get one of those *douds* and put it in this bottle. We will take it to the Ministry."

Awad complied calmly enough, but we could see

that he didn't believe us and our determination was strengthened.

We went to the Ministry of Agriculture and asked for Hafez Bey, the Director. Hafez Bey was unexpectedly easy of access. He admitted us at once. Hafez Bey's office resembled a small laboratory. There was a rack of test-tubes on the desk and the walls were adorned with drawings and charts. There was a picture, greatly magnified, of the Boll Weevil, and a scene depicting the ravages of the Boll Weevil among the cotton. There was a drawing of an immense Mealy Bug and there were instructions, printed in red, concerning the steps to be taken to impede the advance of a swarm of locusts. We became embarrassed and concealed our trivial bottle with shame. Who were we to waste the time of this protector of the country with our impertinent caterpillars? We would willingly have withdrawn, but it was too late. Hafez Bey was looking at us inquiringly. He had a mild, entomological appearance which was not unfriendly, but was doubtless awaiting the revelation of a new menace to the country.

"Good morning," I began diffidently, "I'm sorry to trouble you about a small matter, but the fact is that our garden is infested by caterpillars and we were just wondering whether you could . . . ?" I paused anxiously, but Hafez Bey was not offended by our temerity. He looked up eagerly.

"Ah, worms!" He put his head a little on one side, like a bird. "Can you describe the worm?" he asked, in a tone suggestive of a thrush discussing breakfast with a friend. Encouraged by this show of interest

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we brought out our bottle. He put on a pair of strong glasses, which made his eyes look very large and round, and examined the occupant with enthusiasm. He was evidently delighted with our caterpillar and compared it favourably with other caterpillars, which he kept pickled in a row of bottles on a shelf above his head. He asked me what steps we had taken to rid ourselves of the pest and smiled indulgently as I described our amateurish remedies.

"And so you have come to the Ministry of Agriculture for assistance?" he asked, as one addressing wayward children. I admitted, with a return of diffidence, that if he *could* give us the benefit of his advice. . .

"Advice! Advice is nothing!" He made a large gesture. "To-morrow I will send my inspector and my men, and the worms—annihilation!" I murmured our gratitude and asked rather apprehensively if it would be expensive.

"There will be no cost," he replied simply. "We like to help the people. It is our duty."

We renewed our thanks and retired, considerably elated. Truly a paternal government, we thought to ourselves, as we told Awad of the benevolent power which we had set in motion. Awad, however, did not share our elation. He looked despondent and clicked his tongue in gloomy foreboding. He evidently had no faith in Government Departments. But then, he had not met Hafez Bey.

We had not, ourselves, expected assistance to be forthcoming so rapidly. When Hafez Bey had mentioned "to-morrow" we had assumed that the word merely indicated a certain imminence, implying that in,

say, a week's time something might be done. To our astonishment, however, the next afternoon a van drove up to the door and we were greeted by a young *Effendi*. He was the inspector and he asked our permission to begin his work. We accorded it and four men emerged from the van. They were wearing gas-masks and were armed with engines resembling bellows. Awad and ourselves were asked to retire, but Mary and I watched from an upper window. The four men entered the garden and sprayed it with powdered arsenic. They continued spraying until the air was clouded with arsenic and they themselves could scarcely be seen. Birds which crossed the garden fell dead as they flew and the neighbours' cats leaped over the wall with a speed suggesting that they had been fired out of a gun. After a quarter of an hour the fog began to disperse and the four men and the inspector were seen to re-enter their van and drive away.

The next morning Mary and I ventured to survey the scene. The remaining grass was brown and withered. The flowers were dead and the trees drooping. On the lawn lay the bodies of sparrows and mice, and the corpse of a cat. But the caterpillars, as we were careful to point out to Awad, were dead too.

THE SHOW

Although not entirely chastened by our triumph over the caterpillars Awad was impressed. He saw that our intentions towards the garden, if ill-directed, were in the main benevolent. By degrees he began to understand Mary's Arabic, to allow some of her plans to reach a triumphant maturity. Our relations, indeed, became so friendly that Awad felt justified in demanding a new overcoat and providing, at our expense, one of his sons to help him in the garden.

And then came the question of the Chrysanthemum Show. Mary and I do not like chrysanthemums, nor do we enjoy the ruthless competition of a flower show, and when Awad first mooted the idea we shrank from it in distaste. But Awad was very keen. He said that he was an expert with chrysanthemums and sought to arouse our cupidity by suggesting that if we entered for the show we might win the gold cup.

Mary and I debated the matter privately. Although we did not, ourselves, desire the gold cup we were not unaware of the fact, which Awad had modestly suppressed, that the winning gardener was rewarded with a cash prize. Moreover, we feared that if we took no interest in the show we should be giving Awad excellent grounds for assuming that we took no real

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interest in the garden. We decided that it would be wise to give in to Awad and we reluctantly sent in our entry.

The show began to cast its baleful shadow over the garden some weeks in advance. Ordinary work was neglected and the chrysanthemums were marshalled in battalions on the lawn. Awad could think of nothing else. He cherished the blooms with the single-minded care of an alchemist preparing an experiment in transmutation. He also made excursions in the neighbourhood for the purpose of spying on other gardeners. Mary was forced into the rôle of reluctant conspirator. It was to her that Awad confided the latest news, the most recent rumours and the more damaging scandals. He whispered that Mrs. Chatterby had some good double whites and muttered darkly that she was related to one of the judges; that he had heard that Lady Glossop, whose blooms were backward, was intriguing with the committee to have the show postponed for a week; that Suleiman Bey, being an official in the *Tanzim* Department, was strongly suspected of having borrowed all his best blooms from the Public Gardens. But of Sawiries Pasha, our most formidable rival, the reports were encouraging. Although Awad had watched his preparations with untiring vigilance, it seemed that he had nothing conspicuously better than our own blooms.

As the opening date approached Awad became quite confident and elated. Lady Glossop's intrigues appeared to have been fruitless, Mrs. Chatterby's double whites had bloomed prematurely and even Sawiries Pasha gave us no cause for alarm. Awad redoubled his



"... borrowed all his best blooms from the Public Gardens"

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labour over our own plants and felt that the cash prize was already within his grasp.

Two days before the show, however, Sawiries Pasha suddenly unmasked three entirely new varieties of chrysanthemum which he had been growing in secret. Awad reported this news with consternation. He was in despair. It seemed that at the very last moment the cup had been dashed from his lips. For a whole day he absented himself and we imagined that he had retired to grieve in the bosom of his family.

On the last evening Mary went out to inspect our candidates, the picked blooms which had already been segregated from the rest. To her astonishment she noticed among them three varieties which were certainly not in the garden before. She summoned Awad and asked him where they came from. Awad hugged himself defiantly and replied that they were a very special kind which he had been growing secretly, behind the potting shed, so that rival gardeners should not see them. Mary recognized this at once as a lie, and suggested that Awad had stolen them from Sawiries Pasha. Awad indignantly denied that he had stolen them but admitted, on being pressed, that he had bought them from the Pasha's gardener, adding by way of explanation, that the Pasha was in the habit of retaining the cash prize as well as the gold cup. He pointed out with a conspiratorial smile that with these three added to our own the gold cup was as good as ours. Mary was very angry. She indignantly repudiated Awad's suggestion that she should pay for the purchase and refused flatly to allow the three varieties to be shown at all. Awad expostulated in

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vain. Such quixotic scruples were beyond his comprehension. Eventually, however, he shrugged his shoulders and gave in gracefully enough.

The next morning we arrived at the show in good time and as we arranged our exhibit something of the true competitive spirit descended upon us. We looked eagerly about, comparing our display with the contributions of Mrs. Chatterby and Suleiman Bey, and noting with satisfaction that Lady Glossop's blooms were still only half blown. But the space reserved for Sawiries Pasha was still vacant. Our most formidable rival had not yet arrived. We imagined him giving the last masterly touches to his three new varieties and our hearts sank. Time passed and the Pasha's place still remained conspicuously empty. We shook our heads with a show of sportsmanlike regret and murmured that the Pasha was running things very fine. But at the last moment, five minutes before the judging was due to begin, the Pasha himself appeared. He was in a state of great excitement. A calamity had occurred. His new chrysanthemums could not be found. They had disappeared mysteriously in the night. But the police were already searching the district. In an hour, at most, they would be found. He begged the judges to defer the opening for an hour. But the judges shook their heads. They very much regretted the Pasha's misfortune but it was impossible to alter the arrangements. It would not be fair to the other competitors. Sawiries Pasha was furious. He withdrew his exhibit. He withdrew his subscription. He withdrew from the hall. The judging began and when it was over we found that we had won the gold

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cup. We received it with embarrassment. With shame we also received the cash prize for our gardener.

When we got home we summoned Awad. We looked at him with anger and reproach.

"Where is your honour, *ya* Awad?" we said, "and how is it possible that we should give you this cash prize?" Awad looked at us in astonishment. "My honour?" he said with pained dignity, "*Ma'alesh*"—he looked at the ground—"if *ganabbkum* do not trust me with the money I will call the gardener of Sawiries Pasha and you may yourselves give him the half share."

4. THE STAFF

ABDALLAH

ABDEL REHIM welcomed the advent of our daughter with an enthusiasm only less than that which he would have accorded a son. Since the possession of a second storey was calculated to enhance his social prestige he observed its erection with a benevolent eye and made no remark about the extra rooms there would be to clean. But when we piled Pelion upon Ossa and added Nanny to the household his patience became exhausted. He grew silent and thoughtful. He allowed himself to be seen in attitudes indicative of extreme weariness and despondency, and at length he presented himself before us.

"The work in this house," he said in the tone of one patiently enduring an intolerable injustice, "is very great. All day, from dawn until nearly midnight, I am cleaning the rooms or standing before the stove. Never do I take any rest, and it is indeed," a carefully calculated whimper crept into his tone, "more than one man can bear. It is necessary that I should have help."

Although we knew from observation that Abdel Rehim passed the greater part of the day chatting to his friends outside the kitchen door we had, privately,

to admit that on this occasion there was a certain amount of reason in his demand. And as we also knew from experience that he would probably get his own way in the end, our protests were made rather as a formal objection than with any hope of gaining our point. Abdel Rehim listened courteously to our remarks about the extra expense.

"*Ganabkum* are my father and my mother," he said gracefully, "and are well aware that the money of this house is as much my constant care as if it were my own. And it is not that I mind the work—to work is my duty. But our *sitt* is very strict, stricter than any English *sitt* in Cairo." He watched Mary warm to this subtle flattery. "In her house everything must be perfect, and it is for this reason that I wish to bring a boy to help me—a boy from my own village. He is called Abdallah. A very good boy."

We saw that to refuse this demand would be insanely to deny that Mary was the strictest English *sitt* in Cairo, and thus to bring the blame for dust on the furniture upon ourselves. And Abdallah duly appeared.

This Abdallah was the perfect embodiment of the English idea of the comic black man. He was small, as black as soot, and his smile was as wide and startling as the smile of a jack o' lantern. He also had magnificent white teeth until vanity, and a financial windfall, induced him to change them for a set of gold ones.

Abdallah had no brain at all, but his smile was an excellent substitute, and was employed impartially as an indication of willingness to serve and to turn away wrath. When we told Abdallah to do a thing he smiled and did it wrong, and when we rebuked him for

ABDALLAH

an omission he smiled and said "oll wight" with an engaging innocence.

This phrase "oll wight" constituted Abdallah's entire stock of English, but although it indicated a general desire to do something useful and pleasing, it did not signify that he had understood his instructions. An English-speaking visitor would ask Abdallah for his shoes, and Abdallah would depart with alacrity and return with an orange on a plate, followed by Abdel Rehim who would explain that there were temporarily no apples in the house. Or he would instruct Abdallah to turn on the bath, only to be embarrassed by the discovery that his only suit had been spirited away to the cleaner's.

Abdallah was a thorn in our flesh and rather a hindrance in the house than a help, and yet Abdel Rehim, for some obscure reason, treated him with the indulgence of a loving father towards a half-witted child. We would say to Abdel Rehim: "This boy is no good. He does everything wrong. He sweeps the floor just after he has forgotten to dust the furniture, he leaves the pictures crooked, and although we exhort him daily he always puts the hot-water bottles under the pillows. A boy such as this is of no assistance to you. We would be better off without Abdallah." And Abdel Rehim would smile with fatuous tolerance and say: "*Ma'alesh*, be patient *ganabkum*. The boy is at heart a good boy. He is learning."

But the climax came one day when we found on the white paint of the drawing-room wall the imprint of a hand realistically executed in soot. We said "this is too much. Even Abdel Rehim could hardly condone

such a gross piece of carelessness. That boy must go." We summoned Abdallah, determined that on this occasion justice should take its course, and I pointed sternly to the hand.

"Abdallah," I said in a terrible voice, "what is that?"

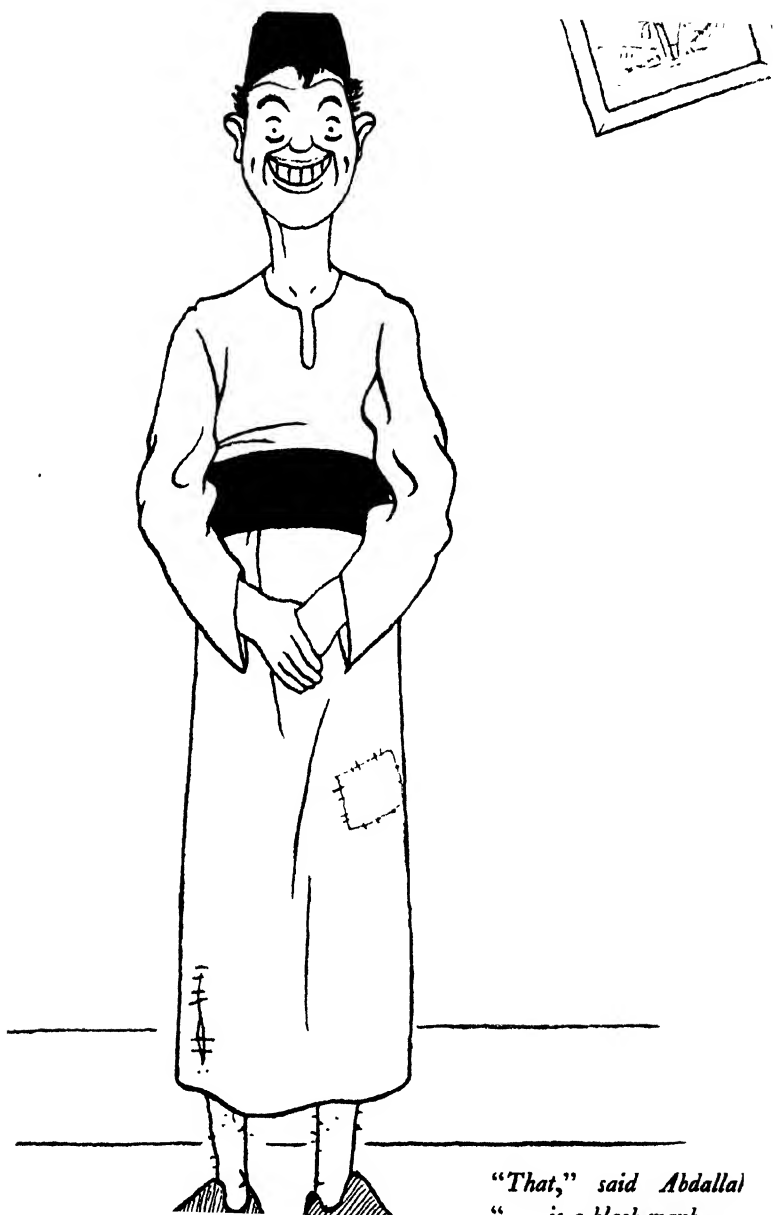
Abdallah's face, however, exhibited none of the expected signs of remorse and mortification. He looked at the hand with a mild speculation in his eye. Then he went over to it and, bending down, subjected it to a long and meticulous scrutiny. At last, when his last doubt as to the precise nature of this phenomenon had been dispelled, he straightened up and his face broke into a reassuring smile.

"That, *Ganabak*," he said in the triumphant tone of one who has solved a knotty problem, "is a black mark."

We stared at Abdallah aghast. Then, feeling that to induce comprehension into such a mind was beyond our powers, we dismissed Abdallah and summoned Abdel Rehim. We explained the case to Abdel Rehim. "The boy," we said, "is not only lazy and useless, he is demented. He must go." But Abdel Rehim still demurred. He still pleaded with us to be patient. He still maintained that the boy was learning. We were astonished at the attitude of Abdel Rehim.

"Come," we said, "be frank with us. Tell us why it is that you wish to keep this boy."

Abdel Rehim hesitated a moment. Then his eyes opened wide in the indignation of a righteous man who has been reminded of an injury. "Abdallah," he said with restrained passion, "is indeed all you say and more and it is a shame to this house that he remains in it.



"That," said Abdalla
" is a black mark . . .

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But he is my brother's son and two years ago I lent my brother twenty pounds. For a time my brother repaid me a small sum each month. Then he said: 'Now I will pay no more. But take my son Abdallah into your house and let his wages discharge the debt!' *Ganabkum*, what could I do?" Abdel Rehim spread out his hands. "My brother is an evil man. By no means would he pay the debt. I was obliged, *akhara betoh*, to take this Abdallah. But in one more month it will be finished. Be patient yet one more month, till all is paid, and then I will find you a very good boy, from my own village."

THE FIRE

During the summer months, when Mary and our daughter were in England, it was occasionally the custom of Abdel Rehim to retire to take his ease in his village, leaving me to the sole care of Abdallah. The care of Abdallah, if well-meaning, was apt to be erratic and ill-directed, casual where it might better have been meticulous and over ardent in matters requiring a thoughtful moderation.

One summer night, for instance, I was awakened about midnight by the smell of smoke. It was smoke with a singularly unpleasant smell—the smell of smouldering blankets. I lay and thought about this smoke. I wondered irritably why people should elect to burn their blankets at midnight. Then I wondered with a mildly sympathetic interest if perhaps one of the neighbours' houses had caught fire. At last, when a wisp of smoke felt its way through my bedroom window, I began tentatively to consider the possibility that it might be my own house.

I put on my dressing-gown and went sceptically downstairs. Here the smoke was thicker, but it was still coming into the house from outside. I went into the garden and my suspicions were suddenly confirmed. I saw the smoke issuing from the room in the basement

THE STAFF

which was dedicated to the repose of Abdallah. I went down the steps and opened the door of this room. It was dark inside and the smell of smouldering blankets was very intense. I switched on the light. In a corner of the room was Abdallah's bed. Smoke was pouring from the bedding and on the bedding, as if on a funeral pyre, lay Abdallah. Abdallah is a heavy sleeper. I shook Abdallah. I explained to him in a loud voice that his bed was on fire. Abdallah was unwilling to believe me. He thought that I was part of his dreams. To exorcise me he pulled the blankets over his head. He caused a draught. Little tongues of flame began to lick Abdallah gently behind, and he became dimly aware that the heat was greater than the normal temperature of an Egyptian summer night. He cast the blankets petulantly aside and the little tongues of flame, refreshed by the rush of air, burst into a cheerful blaze. With a howl of dismay Abdallah leaped suddenly from his bed. He stared at the flames and smoke and it was borne in upon him that the bed, his bed, was on fire.

"Alas!" he cried in a loud and dolorous voice, "the house is on fire!" And before I could arrest his progress he had rushed from the room and disappeared, shouting, into the night.

Relieved of the presence of Abdallah I examined the fire in more detail and found that it was a trifling and unimportant fire, limited to the blankets. I got a bucket of water and a few spadefuls of earth from the garden and in a quarter of an hour I had extinguished the fire.

Congratulating myself upon my presence of mind,

THE FIRE

and coolness in an emergency I left Abdallah's room and emerged into the fresh air of the garden. But as I stood breathing deeply and allowing my eyes to grow accustomed to the intense darkness, my attention was caught by a confused noise of shouting and running feet. I looked down the road and saw—their white *galabiyas* fitfully illumined by the flickering light of lanterns—a motley throng of men, preceded by Abdallah and advancing at full speed. Waving buckets and uttering cries of courageous determination the throng surged through the gate. They saw the lights which I had left on upstairs and downstairs. They sniffed the acrid smell of smoke and they concluded that no time was to be lost. Directed by Abdallah and much reassured by the absence of unusual heat, they swarmed round the house and began to dash water against the walls. Taking my shouts of dismay for encouragement they redoubled their efforts. They threw water through the windows and a few of the most daring even ventured into the house, dragging behind them the garden hose.

While I was unavailingly attempting to get into Abdallah's head the idea that there was, in reality, no fire to put out, powerful headlights and the clanging of a bell announced the arrival of the local fire brigade. I abandoned my argument with Abdallah and rushed desperately to the gate, determined to stave off this further evil. But the firemen misunderstood my eagerness. They saw the flicker of lanterns and heard the shouts of Abdallah's helpers gallantly at work and they pushed me politely aside.

"Calm yourself!" they said reassuringly, "have no

fear! This is not a serious matter. In a quarter of an hour we shall have it under control!"

Disregarding my exhortations they attached a hose to a hydrant in the road and directed a powerful stream of water through the illuminated upstairs windows. I stood before them. I waved my arms. "In the name of God!" I cried despairingly, "there is no fire!" The firemen looked at me pityingly. They thought that fear had unhinged my reason. They shrugged their shoulders, tapping their foreheads knowingly, and continued to direct water through the windows. When they considered that the flames were sufficiently subdued a party of them adjusted the straps of their helmets, placed wet cloths over their noses and mouths, and seizing their axes in their hands advanced grimly upon the house. With the resignation of despair I accompanied them. Near the house the smell of smoke still lingered. The nostrils of the firemen dilated under their cloths and they grasped their axes more firmly. With looks of set resolution they entered the front door.

Ten minutes later they emerged. "*Wullahy!*" they said in tones of reproach and disapproval, "there is no fire!"

"That is what I said," I replied patiently, "I said 'there is no fire.'"

"Then, why," said the firemen in indignation, "did you send for us?"

"There was a fire," I answered, "in my servant's room. It was a small fire and I put it out myself. It was my servant who, without my instructions, summoned the brigade."

THE FIRE

Finding them incredulous I led them to the basement. Abdallah's room had escaped the ministrations of Abdallah's friends. There was a little water on the floor, a little earth on the bed, but otherwise it was curiously undisturbed. I went haughtily to the bed. "Here," I said, throwing back the blankets, "was the fire!" But there, peacefully asleep, lay Abdallah.

SADEK

When Abdallah, like a latter-day Jacob, had completed his term of bondage in the house of his uncle Abdel Rehim the rejoicing in our household was extreme. We felt that no other boy from Abdel Rehim's village, however good, could be as bad as Abdallah. Freed from Abdallah we felt optimistic, carefree and, when we had computed the money we should save by not replacing crockery, rich. In this debonair mood we decided to realize a long-standing ambition. We bought a car.

At first we were very proud of this car. We determined not only to drive it ourselves but to oil it ourselves and, when occasion demanded, grease it ourselves. All that we asked of Abdel Rehim, in fact, was that he should dust it in the mornings. Abdel Rehim, however, strongly disapproved of dusting the car in the mornings. He regarded dusting the car as the thin end of the wedge, and foresaw a time when he might be called upon to wash the car, and even to grease the car. Abdel Rehim was therefore firmly of the opinion that we ought to have a driver. He said that, when the hot weather came, looking after the car ourselves would fatigue us and hinted that in any case such work was unbecoming. But we would not listen. We thought that looking after the car was rather fun.

S A D E K

By this time the successor of Abdallah had arrived in the person of a fat, stolid boy called Sadek. Sadek, as far as we could judge, seemed to be an improvement on Abdallah, but as he was a very new second boy he was considered too lowly and untried to be permitted direct access to the master of the house. His desires and opinions, if approved, were transmitted to us through the Principal Boy, Sadek himself merely attending the audience as a super, with no speaking part.

In accordance with this law Abdel Rehim informed us one morning that, if we permitted it, Sadek had a request to make. As Sadek had not been in our service long enough to render it conceivable that he should propose either a rise in wages or a loan we assented without misgiving. Sadek was summoned from the pantry and placed near the door, in a position nicely calculated neither to offend us by its proximity nor to chill our sympathies by its extreme distance. Once placed he remained entirely motionless, gazing steadfastly at the wall and allowing no expression of any sort to appear on his face. Indicating Sadek with the gesture of one who exhibits a wax-work, Abdel Rehim then explained that although Sadek was a good boy—hard working and honest—he was ambitious. He had ideas beyond the mop and feather duster, and although Abdel Rehim had warned him of the presumptuousness of such a proposal and had long refused to consider bringing it to our notice, Sadek persisted in a desire to become a mechanic. Sadek, in short, wanted to look after our car.

Mary and I were much astonished. In his white

galabiyeh and small round cotton cap, fat Sadek was the very antithesis of a chauffeur. Sadek attired in gaiters and a uniform was a picture that baffled the imagination. We explained to Abdel Rehim that we did not propose to employ a chauffeur; that if we did employ a chauffeur he would not be a Berberine and that if, which was inconceivable, we did employ a Berberine he would not be Sadek. Sadek listened. His eyes did not move from the wall and his face expressed neither surprise nor disappointment. Nor did Abdel Rehim attempt any further advocacy. He merely clicked his tongue as if our words were the confirmation of his own views and shepherded Sadek away. Congratulating ourselves upon an easy victory we dismissed the matter from our minds.

Sadek, however, was not so easily to be put off. He took to haunting the garage. Whenever I went to work on the car he appeared in the background like a reproachful ghost, justifying his presence by vague activities with a broom. He watched me in wistful silence and when opportunity arose would hand me the oil-can or pick up a spanner which I had dropped. Finding that these overtures passed unrebuked he grew bolder and began cautiously to perform other little services.

Looking after the car had ceased by this time to be quite such fun and I found these little services not entirely distasteful. With a gentle insidiousness like the growth of a taste for narcotics they increased their scope. Small precedents were established; small duties came to be regularly performed by Sadek. At length, for garage work, Sadek replaced the round

cotton cap of the house boy by the square proletarian head-dress of the mechanic and allowed the honourable stains of grease and oil to appear on his white *galabiyeh*. With a faint shock I realized that Sadek had regularized his position. He had imperceptibly grown into my assistant.

At this point Abdel Rehim went to Mary in tears. Mary, he said, was more to him than his own mother and he wished for nothing better than to end his days in her service. But he could no longer work in the house with a boy like Sadek. For some weeks Sadek had neglected his work. He had admonished the boy—had even beaten him—but as he was helping the master in the garage he had not made any complaint. But instead of improving, Sadek had grown worse and he had now taken to entering the house with greasy hands and dirty clothes so that it had become impossible to permit him even to approach the bedroom or the drawing room. Abdel Rehim had done his best, but he could not keep the house clean without assistance, and he would rather resign at once than allow the *sitt* to blame him for the lower standard of cleanliness which inevitably impended.

Mary and I considered the situation. We could not decently accept the resignation of Abdel Rehim. As I had connived at his malpractices we could not justly dismiss Sadek. In this dilemma it was a relief to learn that the small boy whom we had recently noticed in the pantry was Abdel Rehim's nephew, guaranteed free from mechanical ambition and eager to become his uncle's apprentice.

THE GUN

Since our house was situated a little way outside Cairo itself Monsieur Joachim, following a precedent set by the Colonel himself in 1912, deemed it wise to supplement the vigilance of the local police by employing, at his tenants' expense, a watchman called Aly. Aly was an incorrigible liar and consistently slept on duty, but was otherwise a good watchman and a truthful man, and since he was not actually a thief Mary and I kept him on for fear of making a change for the worse.

Aly did his watching under a bush near the garden gate and every evening before going to bed I woke him up with difficulty and reviled him for his neglect of duty, and every evening Aly replied with indignation that he had not been asleep, that he never slept, and that he lay under the bush for strategic reasons only. Since reiterated affirmation countered by emphatic denial proves nothing I cast about for a more effective means of bringing Aly to a sense of duty, and after much thought I hit upon the idea of allowing him a gun. I argued that a gun was an object so rare and desirable in the neighbourhood that Aly would stay awake to protect it.

At first it appeared that this plan would be a success. Aly was delighted with his gun and very sensible of the unique dignity its ownership conferred upon him.

THE GUN

For a week he divided his time between parading in a soldierly manner before our gate and sitting with the gun across his knees crooning over it. Then the novelty began to wear off. Aly grew familiar with his gun. He became casual and even bored. Finally I found him asleep once more with the gun by his side.

I was very angry. But I did not awaken Aly. I removed the gun instead. It would be difficult, I thought, for Aly to explain its absence. I hid the gun privately in my room.

The next evening Aly came on duty without his gun and I met him at the gate.

"What is this?" I said. "Why have you come without your gun?"

"*Ganabak*," said Aly, "the gun was becoming dirty. I was ashamed to appear before you with a dirty gun and I have left it with my brother to be cleaned."

"Indeed?" said I, somewhat surprised but not unwilling to see how the matter might develop. "Well, *ya* Aly, you have done wrong, but this time I will say nothing. Be sure, however, to bring the gun to-morrow."

The next evening Aly again appeared unarmed.

"Do you disobey me?" I said to him sternly. "Where is the gun?"

Aly's face assumed an expression of righteous indignation. "*Wullahy!*" he said in an angry tone, "that brother of mine is a donkey and a son of a dog. Without my knowledge he lent the gun to a man who wished to shoot pigeons. Soundly have I beaten him, but the gun can by no means be obtained until to-morrow."

Sure of ultimate victory I decided to wait. "This is



"I removed the gun instead"

THE GUN

a shame upon you," I said, "but out of my kindness I will give you one chance more. Do not, however, for any reason, fail to bring the gun to-morrow."

On the third evening Aly came on duty in a condition of extreme distress. There were tears in his eyes and he conspicuously cast dust upon his head.

"Alas!" he cried without waiting for a question, "a terrible thing has happened. All day have I wept, eating nothing, at the thought of the shame that has overtaken my house. The man who went pigeon shooting has lost the gun. Alas! It was stolen from him as he slept." Aly uttered a loud groan.

I thought that the time was now ripe to expose the man.

"*Ya* Aly," I said in anger and reproach, "why do you lie to me?" The gun is not lost, neither did any man take it to shoot pigeons. It is, in fact, in my room and I took it from you myself while you were sleeping like the pig that you are."

"Sleeping, *ganabak!*" At the sound of this familiar accusation Aly's eyes grew wide with indignation. "*Wullahy, wullahy*, I was *not* asleep! Indeed I saw you take the gun, but I said to myself 'it is the master who takes it and it is not for Aly to dispute the will of the master.'"

THE ROBBERY

Aly, however, had his uses. Being on duty at night only he had ample time during the day to sit in the local café and chat with his friends. And one morning in June, when Mary was in England and Abdel Rehim and I were the sole occupants of the house, he came to me in a state of the utmost indignation, bringing with him a man called Mahmoud. He explained that my house, being surrounded on three sides by fields, had naturally been a favourite topic of conversation among the local burglars and that Mahmoud had overheard four of them actually conspiring to rob the house that very evening between nine and eleven o'clock, while I was out at dinner and Abdel Rehim taking his pleasure in the city.

I was very much incensed at this news. Commending Aly for his loyal vigilance and promising Mahmoud a suitable reward if his story should prove to be accurate I called at the local police station and laid the case before the sergeant-in-charge. The sergeant was equally incensed. Having expressed his amazed indignation that such an outrage should even be contemplated in his district, he seized the telephone and demanded a reinforcement of six constables from Cairo. Then, after a period of concentrated thought, he outlined to me the protective measures which he proposed.

THE ROBBERY

"For the sake of the evidence," he said, "it will be necessary to catch these sons of dogs red-handed. At half-past seven, therefore, I shall bring the four policemen who are attached to my own station and the six whom I have summoned from Cairo and I shall conceal them, some in the sugar-cane which grows on three sides of the house and some in the bushes which border the road on the fourth side. In this manner the house will be completely encircled, and once the thieves have started their work my intrepid men will be upon them like lightning. As for *ganabak*," added the sergeant, "it will be better for you to dine out as if you had heard nothing."

As no better plan presented itself to my mind I accepted the strategy of the sergeant and punctually at half-past seven the ten policemen arrived. They did not appear to be very agile policemen and their faces, far from expressing a courageous determination to baffle the enemies of order, exhibited an anxious melancholy. They took up their allotted posts with an air of reluctance and foreboding, and their trembling was so marked as visibly to agitate the bushes and patches of sugar cane in which they concealed themselves. I surveyed their dispositions with a certain disquiet and decided to modify my own plans. I drove off in my car as arranged, but, instead of remaining at my neighbour's to dine, I returned immediately on foot and stationed myself, with Aly, in the house itself as a last line of defence.

Now Aly, though an elderly man, had spent his youth in smuggling *hashish* across the desert, and the thought that any town-bred burglar should dare to



“ . . with an air of reluctance and foreboding . . . ”

THE ROBBERY

harbour designs upon the house of which he was guardian filled him with the utmost rage and contempt. He stropped the chopper on the palm of his hand and concealed himself behind the kitchen door to await the robbers.

Except for the arrival of Mahmoud the informer, who came to watch the proceedings from the shelter of a nearby tree, nothing happened for some time. The night was warm and moonlit and save for an occasional rustling among the sugar cane and the sound of a muttered prayer in the bushes no sound broke the stillness. The clock in the dining-room struck ten and Aly clearly began to fear that the burglars had thought better of their plan. But at last, just as he had laid down the chopper with a disappointed shake of the head, we saw four men approaching down the road. When they reached the garden gate these four men paused. They looked furtively about them and held a short consultation. Then, apparently satisfied from the darkness of the house that the coast was clear, they began to creep across the lawn and we noted that they were armed with a variety of carpenter's tools, such as chisels and hammers, which would be useful for prizing open a window. Grasping his chopper with a grim satisfaction Aly waited until the robbers had actually inserted a chisel into the frame of the drawing-room window and then leaped out upon them with a terrifying roar. The robbers were aghast. Without hesitation they turned and fled at full speed, uttering loud and dolorous cries and with Aly in hot pursuit. At the same moment the ten policemen, on a signal from the sergeant, rose from their places of concealment and

THE STAFF

started to advance slowly upon the house. But when, instead of four robbers peacefully engaged in their occupation, they saw five desperate villains armed with chisels, hammers and choppers and apparently charging them at full speed their hearts failed them. Realizing with dismay that they had no instructions to cover this contingency they turned and fled in their turn.

When the sounds of the chase had grown faint in the distance Mahmoud the informer descended cautiously from his tree. He looked about him and, finding himself alone and unobserved, softly approached the house. A chisel which the robbers had left behind them was still sticking in the drawing room window and Mahmoud drew a hammer from the folds of his *galabiya*. But when I came out with Aly's gun and asked him what his intentions might be he assured me that he had only come to claim the reward I had promised him.

5. THE CRAFTSMEN

THE LEAK

ON a Sunday morning Abdel Rehim presented himself. From his expression it was apparent that some calamity had occurred and I steeled myself to hear that another of his near relations had died. To my relief, however, I found that it was not leave of absence which was to be the subject of his remarks, but a leak in a water-pipe. I followed Abdel Rehim into the yard and found the second boy and the gardener staring despondently at a sheet of water which was creeping slowly towards the kitchen door. It was clearly a case for professional assistance, but it was Sunday morning and the European plumber does not assist on Sundays. But Abdel Rehim fortunately knew of a Mohammedan plumber. He recommended a man called Mahmoud.

The gardener's son was sent to fetch Mahmoud, who duly arrived on a bicycle. When relieved of his bicycle he was seen to be a man of a dignified presence, with flowing robes and a large curling moustache. Clearly also an honoured friend of Abdel Rehim, who fetched chairs from the kitchen and invited him to drink coffee while the gardener and the second boy, whose social position was less assured, remained at a

distance. When the coffee drinking was over and Mahmoud's health had been discussed at fitting length Abdel Rehim referred casually to the presence of water. Mahmoud became aware of the water. Although it was within a foot of his chair etiquette had hitherto prevented his seeing it. He regarded it with an experienced eye.

"This water," he said impressively, "is due to a leak."

Abdel Rehim and the gardener clicked their tongues and looked admiringly at this technician, whose wisdom enabled him to put his finger so unerringly on the source of the trouble. Mahmoud smiled indulgently. He sat back in his chair and curled his great moustache. He talked of water-pipes, giving the company to understand that they were in the presence of a man whose reputation, in sanitary circles, had long stood unquestioned. This gave an opening to Abdel Rehim to suggest that, if such an unimportant leak was not beneath his notice, here was an opportunity of actually demonstrating his skill. As his chair was now practically surrounded by the flood Mahmoud admitted that this suggestion was not ill-timed. He accordingly asked Abdel Rehim to request the gardener to command the gardener's son to dig a trench and reveal the faulty pipe.

This was done, and water was seen to be spouting out of a hole in it. Mahmoud pointed out the hole.

"It is as I thought," he said, "a leak in the pipe." Mahmoud now regarded the hole from all angles and was eventually able to state that the repair was not outside the compass of his ability, although a less experienced man might reasonably have hesitated to

THE LEAK

attempt it. Abdel Rehim also examined the hole and it was clear that he regarded it as unimportant.

"What would you charge," he asked non-committally, for this trifling repair?"

Mahmoud pondered, and a subtle change came over him. He was no longer the master craftsman impartially discussing the theory of his mystery. He dwindled into the practical man determined to defend his rights.

"My usual charge," he replied, "is one hundred and fifty piastres, but for the sake of *ganab el khwagah*," there was a trace of the familiar whine in his tone, "I will take a hundred."

Abdel Rehim stiffened in well-simulated horror, and the spectators, who had been magically reinforced by the *suffragi* from over the way and a policeman, assumed the judicial expressions of ring-side connoisseurs.

"A hundred piastres!" said Abdel Rehim with a hollow laugh, "say rather thirty."

Mahmoud made no reply and it was evident that he was cut to the heart. He shrugged his shoulders and moved off, with pained dignity, towards the gate. Abdel Rehim waited until he was almost out of ear-shot and then called him back.

"Come now, *ya Mahmoud*," he said, as if relenting, "what is the least, the very least, you would take for mending this small leak?"

Mahmoud folded his arms sternly.

"Ninety piastres," he said firmly, "is my last word, and that solely as a favour to you."

Abdel Rehim was grieved in his turn. He shrugged his shoulders and moved off towards the kitchen. He also was called back.



"He informed me . . . that there was water in the yard"

"Let us not beat about the bush," said Mahmoud. "Tell me frankly what you consider a reasonable price and let us finish the argument."

Abdel Rehim increased his offer to forty-five piastres but Mahmoud suddenly became angry. He dwelt on the thoroughness of his work and his reputation for honourable dealing and brought down his price to eighty piastres, while the spectators leaned forward and sucked in their breath. Abdel Rehim also grew angry and spoke highly of a rival practitioner, who would have been ashamed to demand more than fifty piastres. Both men took deep breaths and shouted at the same time, holding their faces about an inch apart, and it eventually appeared that they had agreed upon a price of sixty-five piastres for the work. The storm ended as suddenly as it had begun and Mahmoud became once more the craftsman, a little condescending, a little aloof. More chairs were brought and while the gardener's son was sent for the necessary tools the company settled down to an animated talk on the absorbing topic of money.

The gardener's son returned and Mahmoud girded up his garments and descended into the trench, whence there issued the sound of hammering and the splash of water. At length Mahmoud emerged. He intimated that his skill had triumphed and invited the company to inspect the repair. This was done with due solemnity and Mahmoud departed amid general felicitations.

The next morning Abdel Rehim presented himself. He informed me, with a certain diffidence, that there was water in the yard.

THE OBSTRUCTION

It is a fact well known to residents that no chimney in Cairo, except the factory chimney belonging to the Tram Company, will draw properly. Our own fire always smoked abominably, and after we had tried every known device for increasing the draught and appealed in vain to Monsieur Joachim, we were at length driven to call in professional assistance, which, in Egypt, is the last resort and a counsel of despair. The expert who arrived proved, like all experts, to be a pessimist. After lighting a candle and remaining for some time with his head up the chimney he pursed up his mouth in a gloomy manner and observed that ours was a very narrow chimney—a disgrace to the man who built it. He asked us reproachfully how we could expect smoke to get out of a chimney only six inches wide. We admitted humbly that it was, no doubt, a great deal to expect but, in short, could nothing be done? The expert lit an experimental fire, looked reprovingly at the smoke eddying about the room and at last said reluctantly that a metal cowl on the chimney-pot might have an effect. We were willing to try anything and we agreed to have the cowl. We waited expectantly for a week, rang up the expert with increasing urgency for two weeks and at the end of a month the cowl was duly installed.

THE OBSTRUCTION

The cowl certainly had an effect, but unfortunately it was not a good effect. The fire smoked worse than it did before and we gave up hope and resigned ourselves to being mildly cured by the end of the winter, like a couple of hams.

Abdel Rehim, on the other hand, did not give up hope. If we were resigned to being smoked, he was not resigned to cleaning up the soot every day and the extra work stimulated his mind. "Why not," he said in the tone of one imparting some great discovery, "try cleaning the chimney?" We did not share the enthusiasm of Abdel Rehim. We had become fatalists about the chimney. We had begun to regard interference with it as displeasing to Providence. However we deferred to Abdel Rehim. We shrugged our shoulders and said sadly that at the worst cleaning the chimney could do no harm. Abdel Rehim was proud of our confidence in him. He fetched a sweep. The sweep went up to the roof and started to clean the chimney with a brick attached to a rope. After a quarter of an hour he came down again and reported that he could not clean the chimney. There was, it appeared, an obstruction. But the sweep was not a pessimist like the expert. The presence of an obstruction only put him on his mettle. He pointed out that the obstruction might very probably be preventing the smoke from getting out of the chimney. He also said that, if we liked, he would return the next day and remove the obstruction. The next day we were having a lunch party and the thought of astonishing our guests with a proper fire was too much for us. We agreed that the sweep should remove the obstruction on

THE CRAFTSMEN

condition that the work was finished by ten o'clock. The sweep laughed the proud laugh of a man confident of his own ability and promised to be finished by half-past nine.

The next morning he arrived early and set to work with a long iron bar. It was a very large and heavy bar and we viewed it with some misgiving. We took Abdel Rehim on one side and suggested that such a bar might do more harm than good, but he reassured us, saying that the sweep was a friend of his and knew very well what he was about. By nine o'clock the sweep had removed several obstructions, including three half bricks and a tin full of putty, and the hammering continued unabated. Hope sprang up in us and we commended the versatility of the sweep. We became so confident that we decided to go out and leave Abdel Rehim to superintend the work.

At half-past twelve we returned. It was a dull cold day and we smiled gaily as we imagined our guests warming themselves before the fire. We found the house clean and tidy and our hearts leaped up within us. We went into the drawing-room to light the fire and we thought with contempt of the inept conclusions of the expert. The drawing-room also was clean and tidy. There was only one thing lacking. The fire was not laid. We summoned Abdel Rehim and were about to rebuke him laughingly for his forgetfulness when we observed that his appearance was not the appearance of a servant about to receive his master's guests. He was much dishevelled and his garments were streaked with soot. His expression, moreover, was so far from gay that we were seized with sudden

THE OBSTRUCTION

foreboding and the smiles froze on our faces. We asked in faint voices if there was something amiss, if, after all, the obstruction had *not* been removed. Abdel Rehim replied that on the contrary many obstructions had been removed but that at the last moment, when Abdel Rehim had been on the point of congratulating the sweep on the success of his labours, the miserable man had lost his grip on the iron bar. The iron bar had fallen down the chimney and not all the efforts of the sweep, Abdel Rehim, the gardener, and the *suffragi* from over the way had availed to get it out. The bar was a very large bar. Wedged firmly in a chimney six inches wide its effect was that of a cork in a bottle.

We waved Abdel Rehim away and looked at each other in silence. We thought of our guests sitting morose and chilly around the empty fireplace. We went hopefully to the window to see if by chance the sun had come out. But it had begun to rain.

THE LITTLE CARPENTER

In Cairo furniture is never bought at a shop. It is either picked up at auctions or, preferably, specially made by little Egyptian carpenters. Many of the older residents, indeed, have little carpenters of their own, amazing chaps, turning out admirable tables and chairs, copying dining-room suites from pictures in an old catalogue and, of course, charging practically nothing.

Although Mary and I had lived in Cairo for years we had never had a little carpenter of our own. We had ignominiously patronized the auction-room and had no single piece copied from a picture in a catalogue. When friends asked us where we got that handsome wardrobe we were forced to reply with affected lightness that we picked it up for a song at old Wotherspoon's sale. But we knew that they were thinking contemptuously that their little carpenter could have made it better for half a song.

So when we decided that Mary must have a new hanging cupboard for her frocks we said "here is our opportunity. We will have the cupboard made by a little carpenter, who will in the fulness of time become our own little carpenter." We accordingly procured an old catalogue and selected our cupboard. Then we sent for Abdel Rehim and asked him if he could

THE LITTLE CARPENTER

produce a carpenter. Abdel Rehim can produce anything—a mere carpenter was child's play. He produced the carpenter immediately from the kitchen like a conjuring trick. Abdel Rehim is good at inferences. He had seen the catalogue and deduced the carpenter. We were not at first favourably impressed by this carpenter. He was a small untidy man with a battered *tarboosh* and his hair full of shavings. Moreover he had only one eye and that eye did not gleam with intelligence. We consoled ourselves with the hope that his lack of pretension was the sign of a good craftsman.

We explained our requirements to the carpenter and gave him the catalogue. He brooded over it for a time with his one eye. He shook his head dubiously, as if mystified. We took the catalogue away and returned it to him the right way up. He held the picture very close to his eye and pored over it as if it were some abstruse proposition in geometry. Then his face suddenly cleared and he said "Ah! A cupboard!" We explained that we wished him to make a cupboard exactly like the one in the picture. He laughed and said that would be a very small cupboard—a cupboard for a doll. We explained that our intention was to have the cupboard reproduced on a larger scale—large enough to contain the *sitt's* frocks. But the carpenter's mind was still running on the doll. He wagged his head, murmuring that it would indeed be the smallest cupboard ever seen. He was overcome by the incongruity of the idea and could not contain his mirth. We explained patiently all over again. In despair we summoned Abdel Rehim, who explained impatiently at the

top of his voice. The carpenter became aggrieved. If we wanted a big cupboard, he asked, why had we shown him the picture of a little cupboard? At the thought of such a very little cupboard he clicked his tongue and chuckled, reminiscently.

In order to obliterate from the carpenter's mind any lingering impressions of a little cupboard we took the catalogue away and started again. "The *sitt*," we said, "has dresses. The dresses must be kept in a cupboard. We want you to make a cupboard to hold the *sitt*'s dresses." We had given up any hope that the cupboard should be a copy of the one in the catalogue, so we stipulated a plain cupboard, painted white. The carpenter was hurt. He thought we were belittling his capacity. He explained that a plain cupboard, such as one might put in a servant's room, was unworthy both of him and of us. He would make us a far grander cupboard—a cupboard with gilding and carved cupids; a cupboard with plush on its doors and pink paint striped with gold on its sides; a magnificent cupboard which would strike our friends dumb with envy and which we could point out with pride as the masterpiece of Daoud the carpenter. We disclaimed these social ambitions. Explaining that the English were a modest and retiring people who found beauty in simplicity, we insisted on our plain cupboard. The carpenter was astonished. He cast about in his mind for some motive which would make our conduct comprehensible. At last his face brightened and he explained to Abdel Rehim the subtle cunning with which we sought to conceal our wealth by this show of homeliness. Looking at us with a new

THE LITTLE CARPENTER

respect he took the measurements for the cupboard and departed.

After he had gone Mary and I discussed our carpenter. Our conclusions were not reassuring. It did not seem to us possible that our cupboard would be a good cupboard. We expressed our doubts to Abdel Rehim. "The carpenter," we said disapprovingly, "is an imbecile. It is a shame upon you that you brought us such a carpenter." Abdel Rehim looked pained. He folded his arms, placing his hands in his sleeves. He said with some dignity that the carpenter was an excellent carpenter; that it was inconceivable that he should bring us a bad carpenter and that in any case he would make himself personally responsible for our cupboard.

We were not convinced by Abdel Rehim's promises and when, a week later, the cupboard actually arrived we went to inspect it, filled with the gloomiest forebodings. To our surprise it was quite a good cupboard. The dimensions were not absolutely exact, but it was made well and well painted and above all it held all Mary's frocks. After pointing out to the carpenter that he had omitted to put a key in the lock we paid the four pounds agreed upon and dismissed him, expressing ourselves well satisfied. Our self-esteem was, in fact, greatly enhanced. We were now definitely among the elect. We left our cupboard temporarily in the hall and displayed it proudly to our friends, extolling the merits of our little carpenter.

A few days later the local auctioneer, an old acquaintance of ours, called upon us. "I'm sorry to trouble you," he said, "but would you mind handing

THE CRAFTSMEN

this key to your servant? He bought a cupboard at one of my sales about a week ago, but the key was missing and it's only just turned up." Then his eye lit on our cupboard. "Oh," he said crossing over to it and locking it, "I didn't know that he was buying it for you. I see you've had it touched up. Quite like new isn't it? A real bargain too at a pound and a half."

6. IN THE OFFICE

JORKINS WITHOUT SPENLOW

AS the gates of Hell were guarded by Cerberus and the Garden of the Hesperides was defended by a dragon, so all of us who do business in Cairo are protected by our Chief Clerks, whose function it is to sit in the outer office and forbid entrance to callers.

But unfortunately even Chief Clerks must occasionally be granted a holiday and one summer my own Monsieur Joseph went on three months' leave. Monsieur Joseph left me with reluctance and deprecation. He feared that I might find the hot weather *assez pénible* and suggested that the contact with callers would prove tedious and exacting. I secretly agreed with Monsieur Joseph on all these points, but I affected to make light of them. With an air of nonchalance which I was far from feeling I urged Monsieur Joseph to go, to enjoy the *bains de mer*, and to divert himself without uneasiness.

On the day after his departure, however, I went to my office with the grave misgivings of a knight who has entered the lists without his shield. I sat down at my desk and tried to imagine myself the ruthless captain of industry which Monsieur Joseph had so

IN THE OFFICE

successfully proclaimed me. Time passed, the routine of the office proceeded as usual, but no callers presented themselves. After an hour I began to think that no callers would come. My mouth gradually lost its grim line and my features softened into their normal expression of nervous kindness. But just as I was throwing my indiarubber into the air with a gesture of gay insouciance, the door opened to admit Monsieur Shouek.

Monsieur Shouek, who is the tenant of an office in the firm's building, is fat and wily and he entered my room with a furtive suddenness. He thought he had eluded Monsieur Joseph and his face wore an expression of nervous triumph. He did not know me personally, but my appearance was reassuring, and when he realized that Monsieur Joseph was not temporarily absent but safely out of the country his demeanour underwent a subtle change. He looked at me with a crafty smile and sat down with the speculative esurience of a buzzard who is wondering whether the body is dead or not. I looked at Monsieur Shouek with mistrust. I wished he were not with me. Under his appraising eye I began to feel helpless and forlorn—like a hermit crab without its shell, like a fat boy under the inspection of a cannibal king. Monsieur Shouek rubbed his hands and said that he had long sought an opportunity for a friendly talk. My heart sank. I have a horror of friendly men. They mesmerize me into accepting their point of view. In five minutes Monsieur Shouek mesmerized me into reducing his rent. But Monsieur Shouek was not grateful. He looked at me with the surprised contempt of a duellist

who has unexpectedly discovered that his opponent's revolver is only a water-pistol and it was evident that he regretted not having demanded twice the reduction. He departed dissatisfied, shrugging his shoulders.

My next caller was a customer called Abdel Rahman. He was a big man from Upper Egypt who wore silk robes and a ferocious black moustache curled up at the ends. The manner of Abdel Rahman was boisterous and, when he found me alone, exultant. He remembered all the grievances he had had for the past twenty years; all the just claims against the firm which Monsieur Joseph had unjustly disallowed; all the hard bargains which Monsieur Joseph had unrighteously driven. He looked at me reproachfully and contrasted the present unhappy state of affairs with the atmosphere of generous reciprocity which, he said, characterized his relations with the firm in the time of the previous manager. I listened to Abdel Rahman with uneasy defiance. I knew him to be rich, shrewd and ruthless; I knew that his grievances were inventions and that even Monsieur Joseph had never bested him in a bargain. With the desperate courage of a cornered rabbit I resisted the demands of Abdel Rahman, but when at length he was about to depart in dignified sorrow I was suddenly overcome by unreasonable remorse and gave in to half of them.

I was now definitely alarmed. I felt that if matters were allowed to take their course Monsieur Joseph would return to find the property given away, the business bankrupt and myself sold into slavery. I considered gloomily what to do and suddenly I had an idea. I recalled that, owing to the vigilance of

Monsieur Joseph, most of my callers do not know me personally. I accordingly moved from my private room and seated myself outside at the desk vacated by Monsieur Joseph.

Shortly afterwards my third caller arrived. He was a suave Jewish gentleman who desired to see the manager on urgent personal business. I replied that the manager was too busy to receive callers, but that I was his confidential secretary and that any business he had in mind might freely be revealed to me. The Jewish gentleman demurred but, now that I was no longer the manager, I overruled his objections with a cynical calm, and he eventually admitted that he was the representative of a *famille respectable mais malheureuse* and wished to appeal for a donation of five pounds. Had I been the manager caught in my private room I should weakly have given in, but now I said that the manager was a *type excessivement nerveux* and unfortunately took the view that such requests were nearly always swindles. But that, nevertheless, if the gentleman insisted, I would speak to him. The Jewish gentleman turned a little pale but was unwilling to lose the five pounds. I accordingly shrugged my shoulders and went into my private room. I sat at my desk and talked to myself in low tones. Then I suddenly shouted angry words in English and threw a heavy dictionary onto the floor with a crash. I finally emerged in terror from my room and hastily conducted the Jewish gentleman out of the office, muttering that there was no time to be lost.

I often wonder now whether it is really necessary to retain the services of Monsieur Joseph.

COFFEE IN EGYPT

If, in England, everything stops for tea, in Egypt every conversation starts with coffee. In the ordinary way I am not much incommoded with conversation. I sit in dignified seclusion in my private office and leave the coffee drinking to my Monsieur Joseph. But on rare occasions it is my duty to leave my safe and comfortable desk and go into the villages of Egypt to establish personal contact with the firm's customers.

To give due emphasis to the solemnity of the occasion the advent of the manager is heralded by a flight of post-cards addressed to the customers who are to be honoured, and at five o'clock on the morning of the appointed day I go sadly to Cairo station in order to reach Mansourah in time for the opening of the market. In the train I look through the list of the thirty customers who are to be visited, and rehearse Arabic phrases which express solicitude about health, wonder at the size and magnificence of premises, and gratitude for being received by distinguished men.

At Mansourah I meet Monsieur Samaan, the firm's traveller. Monsieur Samaan and I are both feeling hungry and we pause in the station to drink coffee. We also eat unleavened bread with cheese and, by way of raising ourselves to terms of conversational equality with our customers, consume several raw onions.

This is not the kind of breakfast to which I am accustomed and, against my better judgment, I console myself with some more coffee. Monsieur Samaan and I then proceed to the premises of the first customer on my list, a certain Mohammed. I exchange compliments with Mohammed and, before proceeding to business, accept from him a cup of coffee. We then visit the establishments of Ahmed, Sabet, Mahmoud, Khalil and Abdel Rehim, and, with diminishing alacrity, I accept a cup of coffee from each of them. By the time I am welcomed by Abu Tisht my appetite for coffee is exhausted and I decline the proffered refreshment. It happens, however, that this Abu Tisht is a poor man and the least esteemed of the firm's customers in Mansourah, and he takes my refusal as implying a reflection on his social standing.

"It is known to me," he says in offended tones to Monsieur Samaan, "that the manager has taken coffee with all the customers, omitting none, and if he now rejects my hospitality it is because I am poor and he wishes to shame me before the town."

Monsieur Samaan naturally sets to work at once to refute this most unjust conclusion. He says eloquently that Abu Tisht, if not the richest, is the most honourable of men, that his name is frequently cited by the Directors in England as a model to all the firm's customers, and that if the manager seemed to refuse coffee it was owing to a misunderstanding. I immediately confirm that nothing could have been farther from my thoughts than to refuse coffee, and to remove the last doubts from Abu Tisht's sensitive mind I am obliged to accept a second cup.

COFFEE IN EGYPT

We then leave Abu Tisht's premises, and I say to Monsieur Samaan that my endurance is now finally at an end, that I have drunk ten cups of coffee and that not even the greatest stickler for etiquette could ask me to drink any more. But Monsieur Samaan takes an opposite view. He says that as it will now be generally known in the town that I have coffee with the least worthy of our customers it will be doubly an insult to refuse the hospitality of any of the others. He claims urgently that the whole future of the firm depends on my fortitude in this matter and eventually compels me to agree.

The day passes. Morning turns to afternoon, afternoon gives way to evening and my attitude towards coffee changes from distaste to revulsion, and from revulsion to the keenest abhorrence, until, as we approach our twenty-fifth customer, I regard it with such utter loathing that I am ready to sacrifice the firm, my career, even my wife and children rather than drink any more. So when the customer, whose name is Korayem, courteously offers me my twenty-ninth cup I courteously refuse. But Korayem is a customer of the highest standing with the firm and it is inconceivable to him that I should reject his coffee. He thinks that I am joking, he presses me further, and when I continue to refuse he indulgently assumes that I am exhibiting a genteel reluctance—that I am emphasizing my high position by the display of a fascinating and gentlemanly coyness. We argue on these lines for a long time and at last I grow desperate. I tell him the truth and throw myself on his mercy.

"Listen!" I say, "I am ill. I am near death. I



"Listen," I say, "I am ill . . . one more cup would be the end of me"

cannot drink coffee. One more cup would be the end of me."

Korayem is much concerned. He is a kindly man and he does not wish to kill the manager. But he is also resourceful and he is determined not to fall short in hospitality. After a little thought he says he will give me something harmless and even beneficial, and before I can protest he has provided me with a large glass of buffalo's milk. I turn pale. Beads of cold sweat start out on my brow. But it is impossible to spurn a refreshment so kindly intended. I drink the buffalo's milk, and with the remaining five customers I submit to coffee as a man who had known scorpions would submit to whips.

But at last the day's business is done. I stagger to the train. Borne down, overwhelmed and utterly oppressed and dejected by my thirty-four cups of coffee, I return to Cairo. At the door of my house my wife meets me. She looks at me with concern and solicitude.

"My dear," she says, "how tired you look! But we'll soon put that right, I'll just go and make you a strong cup of coffee."

HÔTEL DE LUXE

On another of my visits to the villages I arrived at sunset at Sohag in Upper Egypt. I was tired and dusty but expectant; for at Sohag, so I had been assured, there was an hotel with modern improvements—quite in the European style. After two weeks in hotels without modern improvements I felt this would be paradise.

The outside of the Hôtel Magnifique was not imposing. It affected peeling plaster and rusty iron balconies with red blankets hanging over them. But I was not discouraged. I could do without spacious public rooms. I could do without gilt chairs and cheval glasses. What I wanted was a bath.

The proprietor, who was a Greek in pyjamas and carpet slippers, received me with open arms. Pointing me out proudly to the citizens of Sohag who had accompanied me from the station, he said that I was the first Englishman who had ever patronized his hotel—the first guest who, being able to compare it with the Ritz in London, would be in a position properly to appreciate its magnificence. Accompanied by twelve of the elders of the town he proceeded at once to display this magnificence. He showed me the bedroom with its five iron bedsteads and its five pairs of wooden sandals. With the pride of a mother showing off her first-born

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he showed me the European water-closet, complete except for the water. I admired the bedroom. With the approval of the twelve elders I congratulated the proprietor on his European water-closet. But my heart was heavy. There had been no mention of a bath. The inspection continued. The proprietor showed me the electric light. He drew my listless attention to a mosquito-net which could, if I so desired, be attached to the ceiling over my bed. But at last, when I had given up all hope, he paused dramatically. Silencing the chatter of the twelve elders with a compelling gesture he drew himself up to his full height.

"Monsieur," he said, "it is my aim as a good *hôtelier* to satisfy the requirements of all my guests. The water-closet, the mosquito-net," he dismissed them with a modest smile, "you have already seen. But if monsieur, being English, should by chance also require a bath, why, *wullahy el azim*," he cried in a burst of pride, "the bath exists and my servant will instantly prepare it."

"Monsieur," I replied, shaking the proprietor warmly by the hand, "you think of everything. No luxury is beyond your scope. *Evidemment* I will have a bath."

This announcement gave the twelve elders a quite extraordinary gratification. The bath, it appeared, was virgin. No one had ever dared it before. They crowded round me, shaking my hand and patting me on the back as if I had recklessly agreed to ride an unmanageable horse. After much shouting and bustle the hotel servant appeared, bearing an armful of green

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sticks. He disappeared into the bathroom and shortly afterwards great volumes of smoke began to roll down the corridor and out of the window. Seeing the smoke the whole population of Sohag turned out. The Fire Brigade stood by. As soon as it was known that the bath was actually to be used, small boys swarmed up all the palm trees which commanded a view of the bathroom window.

After an hour of unremitting labour on the part of the hotel servant, and growing excitement among the populace, the smoke abated and the proprietor was able to announce that all was ready. Pale but calm I put on my dressing-gown. I put on the wooden sandals. I picked up my towel and the soap and I went to the bathroom. There was the bath. There, underneath it, glowed the embers of the fire which had made it hot. There, in it, was an inch of tepid water the colour of ink. There, at the door, were the proprietor and the twelve elders peering excitedly over each others' shoulders. There, on a palm tree just outside the window, was the face of a small boy, and from the distance came an expectant murmur from the population of Sohag.

I am a modest man. I should have liked to shut the door, to draw a curtain over the window. But I looked at the eager faces of the twelve elders and the small boy, I listened to the murmur of the crowd and I realized that I was as one dedicated. With a bashful smile I took off my dressing-gown.

"The Englishman has taken off his clothes!" shouted the small boy from the palm tree, and there was a tense silence.

HÔTEL DE LUXE

"He has stepped into the bath!" A sigh went up from the crowd.

"*Wullahy!* He sits in the bath! He pours water over himself! Not even his head is spared!" Cries of amazement and admiration were heard.

"*El hamd 'll Allah!* The Englishman is still alive! He has risen from the bath. It is finished."

It was finished. I put on my dressing-gown. I put on the wooden sandals. With dignity I received the congratulations of the proprietor. In response to the urgent appeal of the twelve elders I allowed myself to be seen for a moment from the bathroom window. With the plaudits of the crowd ringing in my ears I went to bed, knowing what it is to be a king. I had the room to myself. In an hour I began to realize even more acutely what it is to be the sole object of attention. I got up hastily and after one look at the bed I decided to spend the night at the station.

MR. KHALIFA

Between Mr. Khalifa and myself there existed a bone of contention. For six months he had been unrighteously demanding an allowance of one Egyptian pound on the price of goods bought long ago, and for six months I had been justly refusing to accord it. So when I arrived at my office on a Monday morning and found Mr. Khalifa already installed in the armchair, I looked through the door in indignation and dismay.

"Why," I said to my chief clerk Monsieur Joseph, "why on earth did you let him in?"

Monsieur Joseph shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"He is the oldest customer," he replied with resignation, "and he is a very old man. What could I do?"

I went in to Mr. Khalifa with a sigh.

"A blessing has happened!" I said with false enthusiasm, "how is your health?"

Mr. Khalifa, who was old and stout, struggled out of the armchair.

"How is your health?" he replied panting, "a happiness has entered with you."

When these courtesies had been repeated several times with suitable variations, I persuaded Mr. Khalifa to sit down again, and he accepted a cup of coffee. While he was drinking it with that loud sucking noise

which denotes appreciation, I rang for Monsieur Joseph and we discussed Mr. Khalifa freely in French. We reminded each other sternly that if Mr. Khalifa was the oldest customer he was also the worst. We looked with disgust at Mr. Khalifa's overdue account and we said firmly that only over our dead bodies would he obtain an allowance. Monsieur Joseph, who did not have to argue with Mr. Khalifa, was particularly adamant. As he went with alacrity to the door he urged me to steel my heart.

Mr. Khalifa waited until Monsieur Joseph had gone and then placed his coffee-cup on the floor with a loud and dignified belch. He smoothed his long silken robes and pushed his turban back a little way to scratch his brown forehead. We talked for a time of the weather, the state of the crops, the political situation. As if repairing an unaccountable omission we inquired with sudden earnestness about each other's health. Mr. Khalifa looked at me with a cunning air and eventually edged the conversation around to the market, the poverty of the *fellahin* and the meagre profits which were the sad lot of the honest merchant. He reminded me of the many years during which, contrary to the worldly advice of his partner, he had loyally dealt with my firm, and when he thought I had been sufficiently softened he introduced the question of the allowance.

I did not reject his demand outright. I merely laughed tolerantly as if Mr. Khalifa were seeking to divert me with untimely levity. Mr. Khalifa, however, affected to think that I was laughing at the smallness of his proposal. He laughed in his turn and

said deprecatingly that the allowance he asked was indeed small—far less than his due—and that his partner, who had never approved of his self-sacrificing loyalty to my firm, had wished to demand double the sum.

But I had a Jorkins of my own so I waved this talk of his partner loftily aside and introduced the subject of the Directors, who lived safely in England. I said that although I knew Mr. Khalifa to be as full of honour as of years and that nothing could have given me, personally, greater pleasure than to oblige him, I was, in fact, merely a pawn in the firm. It was the Directors in England who made the decisions and the Directors were very hard. And among the many things which the Directors held in the utmost detestation and had utterly forbidden, was the granting of any kind of allowance, however small and however well deserved. And if I disobeyed the Directors, I added, trembling a little at the thought, they would be very angry and dismiss me from the firm.

But Mr. Khalifa was not impressed. He smiled a gentle smile and praised God that the Directors were so firm and strong-minded. But he would himself, he said, write the Directors a letter, and on the recommendation of so old and valued a customer, far from being dismissed, I would be greatly honoured, and my salary would be increased.

I said that I could never consent to give him so much trouble, and prepared to play my last card. Looking at Mr. Khalifa with an air of cunning and secrecy, I said that I had thought of a means of arranging the matter so that the Directors would not know

MR. KHALIFA

what had occurred. Mr. Khalifa should receive his allowance, but in the firm's books the amount should be entered not as an allowance but under the heading of charity to Mr. Khalifa and his family. This suggestion was very distasteful to Mr. Khalifa. It wounded his pride. He looked at me with anger and reproach, and said that rather than that such a shame should come upon his family he would accept no allowance at all. He retired to a corner of the room and brooded there with his eyes closed. I thought I had defeated Mr. Khalifa. Rubbing my hands I dismissed the thought of allowances from my mind and returned to the morning's work.

But after half an hour Mr. Khalifa awoke from his brooding much refreshed.

"*El hamd 'll Allah!*" he said, "how is your health?" He came and stood in front of my desk. "There is one small matter," he said cheerfully, "which I wish to discuss with you before I go. There is due to me an allowance of one Egyptian pound."

THE TRAM

In order to speed up traffic the tram, in progressive towns, is being replaced by the trolley-bus, and with the idea of increasing the efficiency of our Cairo office there has long existed in my mind a plan for reforming our Monsieur Boulos.

Monsieur Boulos is our correspondence clerk and it is his duty, as it has been for the last thirty years, to read aloud the Arabic letters and to take down the replies. In the more spacious days of Monsieur Boulos's prime there was apparently no hurry about finishing with the Arabic letters and, as he is something of an Arabic scholar, it is his custom to read each letter with the nice discrimination of a connoisseur—pausing to savour to the full the eloquence of some well-turned phrase, or interrupting himself to disparage a sentence which strikes him as descending to the colloquial. This is naturally a slow process, and as it is Monsieur Boulos's unshakable conviction that the best customers are the ones who write the purest Arabic, it also takes time to persuade him, when the replies are being dictated, that such characteristics as solvency and honest intentions must also be considered.

As obstacles to rapid progress, however, these matters are trifles compared with an elaborate and laborious system of numbers and cross-references which

THE TRAM

Monsieur Boulos insists upon appending to each letter, on the grounds that he learned it thirty years ago in a Business Efficiency Course at the Y.M.C.A. To find the answer to any question by the use of this system is as practical as taking a short cut to Hampton Court through the maze, but to Monsieur Boulos it is a rune, the ultimate mystery of his craft, and he clings to it with the tenacity of an elderly enchanter to his Pentagon.

Nevertheless, in the name of progress, it is my plan to do away with this system and one day, when I had been exasperated by a particularly heavy mail, I spoke seriously to Monsieur Boulos.

"*Ecoutez!*" I said, "the letters take too much time and you see how the other clerks are waiting at the door, eager to get on with the day's work. It is not right that in these times there should be so much delay, and the reason for it," I continued sternly, "is your numbering. From to-day, this numbering must cease."

Monsieur Boulos, however, was not impressed by this invitation to become progressive. He looked at me with the pitying smile of a wizard who has been invited to summon spirits with an electric bell.

"*Mais, monsieur le directeur,*" he said with some condescension, "the numbering is necessary. It is efficiency, and without it all is confusion. So I have learned in the Business Course."

And so, I thought with indignation, might a tram extol the superiority of travelling on lines.

"It is not efficiency!" I shouted, enraged, "it is imbecility, and I will tolerate it no longer! Listen! I will show you a better system—simple and modern."

But in Egypt anger is very catching and Monsieur

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Boulos still refused to move with the times. Instead he turned very pale and his eyes became suddenly dilated.

"This is an insult!" he cried in a trembling voice. "After thirty years in the office I, an old man, am called an imbecile! To the holder of a diploma in the Business Course such a thing is intolerable. It touches his honour. And with the man who touches my honour I can no longer remain." Without giving me time to reply Monsieur Boulos swept magnificently out of the office.

At first I was rather taken aback. I even toyed pusillanimously with the idea of recalling Monsieur Boulos. But I steeled my heart. I muttered the words "progress" and "efficiency" and I encouraged myself with the thought of a new correspondence clerk, young and amenable, who would do what I wanted. By the time I had returned to the office after lunch I felt quite confident and debonair, like a man who had unexpectedly evoked the Golden Age.

But, unfortunately, no sooner had I settled down to work than the forces of reaction presented themselves in the unexpected form of Madame Boulos and three of her daughters. They were dressed in black and their faces had been whitened as if to depict the ravages of want. Madame Boulos grouped her daughters pathetically about her, and, having ascertained that their handkerchiefs were drawn and ready for instant use, began to intercede for her husband. For thirty years, she said in a voice vibrant with emotion, Monsieur Boulos had devoted himself with unswerving loyalty to the service of the firm. During this period

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he had been a faithful husband—she stifled a sob—an indulgent father—here the three daughters simultaneously held their handkerchiefs to their eyes—and had brought up a grateful family whose nightly custom it was to mention the name of *monsieur le directeur* in their prayers. But now—Madame Boulos made a despairing gesture and her daughters stiffened themselves in preparation for the climax—suddenly, at a blow, this happy picture is dissolved. The breadwinner finds himself brutally dismissed and his children, the innocent little ones—here the three representatives of these innocents wept in unison—are left to beg their bread upon the streets. There was a dramatic pause while Madame Boulos recovered her breath. Monsieur Boulos, she continued, could not speak for himself. At this moment he lay on his bed, broken-hearted and prostrate with grief. But she had considered it her duty as a wife and mother to intercede on his behalf, and to make this last appeal to the generosity for which *monsieur le directeur*, in common with all English people, was so well known.

I listened to Madame Boulos in gloomy silence, and as her emotion gathered intensity I gradually dwindled into acquiescent and unprogressive despair. I knew that her conclusions were unjust and exaggerated, that her family were in no danger of starvation, and that her daughters' spontaneous tears were inspired by that high art which conceals art. But I also knew that Monsieur Boulos and his system would be with me again the next morning.

It is perhaps fortunate that trams generally have no wives.

UNCLE IN THE WOOD

If a manager cannot insist upon prosperity for his firm he can, I resolved on the first of January, at least require punctuality from his staff. I accordingly arrived early at my office, noted that Monsieur Yacoub was again late, sat down at my desk with my watch before me, and gave instructions that he was to report to me immediately he arrived. When he put in a deferential and breathless appearance I looked coldly at the watch.

"Monsieur Yacoub," I said sternly, "you are half an hour late and I am determined that in this office lateness is to be a thing unheard of. What is your reason?"

Monsieur Yacoub, who is small and emotional, turned pale and swallowed several times.

"*Monsieur le directeur*," he said at last, "to be late is a fault—the gravest fault—and often it has preyed upon my mind. But the reason," he spread out his hands to indicate the insurmountability of this reason, "is my nephews."

"*Comment?*" I said incredulously, "your nephews? Can a man's nephews make him late in the morning?"

"Alas, monsieur," said Monsieur Yacoub, "they are wicked boys. This morning they refused to go to school—the good school of the Fathers to which I,

their guardian, have sent them. For an hour I have implored them."

"*Tiens!*" I said, somewhat taken aback, "what a thing it is to be an uncle." I shrugged my shoulders. "But listen, monsieur," I said firmly, "you must be more severe with these boys. For unpunctuality is a thing intolerable to me."

A week later, however, Monsieur Yacoub was late again.

"How is this?" I said angrily. "Did I not forbid you to be late?"

Monsieur Yacoub looked at me with tears in his eyes.

"*Monsieur le directeur,*" he said, "I regret it infinitely, but it is my nephews. They will not work. All day they sit in the café, smoking and drinking and wasting their money. For an hour I have remonstrated with them."

"*Comment!*" I said in amazement, "last week they were at school and already they are smoking and drinking in the café? What precocity is this!"

"But no, monsieur," replied Monsieur Yacoub sadly, "these are the elder boys. But the younger ones are still equally bad. Last night they would not do their home-work. Until midnight I was with them."

I am, I hope, a patient man, but when for the third time these black-hearted nephews made Monsieur Yacoub half an hour late in the morning I determined that somehow this tyranny must end. I decided, therefore, upon an appeal to Monsieur Yacoub's pride.

"Come," I said, "you are, *n'est ce pas*, an ambitious man who wishes to get on in the firm and reach a

position of responsibility. But when the Directors in England ask about you and I have to say that you are a man who cannot even control his nephews, they will be disgusted. They will say 'here is a man who is not fit to be a clerk. He must be made office boy.'"

Monsieur Yacoub appeared to be strongly moved by those remarks. After making a series of gestures indicating mortification, despair and the dawn of a new resolve, he suddenly drew himself up to his full height.

"*Monsieur le directeur*," he said, "you are right. I have been weak. But to-morrow everything will be different." He swelled his chest and dilated his nostrils. "Listen!" he cried, "this is what I shall say to my nephews." He looked me fiercely in the eye. "'Squanderers!' I shall say, 'ingrates, idlers, I have been too patient with you. But now the end has come. I no longer permit that you remain in my house. Take note that this very day you seek for work or I throw you out into the street!'" He paused for breath. "And then," he continued magnificently, "if they do not listen I take my boot and I kick them out. Sol!"

"Excellent!" I said approvingly. "This is how an uncle should behave."

The next morning Monsieur Yacoub arrived most punctually, and there was about him the exalted air of one who has turned over a new leaf.

"*Alors?*" I said, "you have spoken to the nephews? Even now, perhaps, they are eagerly seeking work?"

"I have spoken," said Monsieur Yacoub with shining eyes; "and how, monsieur, can I ever be sufficiently grateful for your advice? Ah, what remorse,

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what penitence have my nephews displayed! How the younger ones have wept, how have they promised to get scholarships, to work unremittingly for the *baccalaureat*. With what manly shame have the elder ones abjured the café! Truly, monsieur, I am a new man, vigorous, ruthless and determined! Never again shall I be accused of being late."

I was very pleased. This is excellent, I said to myself. The nephews are reformed, the uncle is a new man and therefore he will have no further excuse for unpunctuality.

But the next week Monsieur Yacoub was once more half an hour late. I was gravely disappointed.

"What now?" I asked in despair. "Have the nephews already forgotten their good resolutions? Am I to hear, perhaps, that they are in prison? Or that the younger boys, unnerved by your severity, have run away from home?"

Monsieur Yacoub looked at me reproachfully.

"*Mais non, monsieur*," he replied, "my nephews, as I hope you will inform the Directors in England, remain a model of what nephews should be. But I myself, *monsieur le directeur*," he spread out his hands. "Now that I have no anxieties I have nothing to do in the evening. I go to the café and the nephews say that I am wasting my time. For an hour this morning they kept me—remonstrating with me."

NUISANCE VALUE

On the day of my return to Cairo, from leave in England, Signor Oloufa called upon me at half-past ten. Signor Oloufa is the dictator of an office in the firm's building and thus my tenant. He is a fierce and unsatisfied man, and regards his landlord as little better than a democracy. Nevertheless we are on friendly terms.

"*Bonjour!*" said Signor Oloufa, throwing himself noisily into a chair. "I welcome you on your return to Egypt. Business is very bad. You have not yet had time to see, but I tell you. The market, the prices, the customers! Never have I seen a worse season." He shook his head and eyed me gloomily. "My rent," he continued in the tone of one who spontaneously demands Corsica and Nice, "is disgracefully high. It must be reduced. Such is my right."

"*Bonjour!*" I replied affably. "I welcome your visit. It does me honour." Then, as one who spontaneously demands Naples and Vesuvius, "I have good news. The Directors in England have instructed me to raise all the rents. And yours, as you are the most privileged tenant, is to be raised the most."

Signor Oloufa was enraged. He seized me violently by the lapel.

"*Comment?*" he cried. "But this is an impossi-

bility! A wickedness unheard of! An abomination! I give you my notice! I will write you a registered letter. I will let the Directors see what it is to raise the rent of Oloufa!" He looked at me closely with a sudden frown. "Ah, but you are joking," he said in disgust. "It is the foolish and bourgeois custom of the English to joke on serious matters. But frankly now, what reduction shall I have this year? The prices, the customers," he added in tragic tones, "it is a disaster. Every day I lose money."

"You jest," I replied disdainfully, "as is the virile custom of the great Italian nation. Frankly, then, we make no reductions this year. Already we have been too generous."

Signor Oloufa argued with me. He placed his face within an inch of my own and threatened to leave the building. He stood up and waved his arms, and shouted that he was the oldest, the most faithful, the most long-suffering of the firm's tenants, and that a reduction was merely an elementary right. But I remained unmoved, and at last he grew suddenly calm.

"Very well," he said with a sinister smile, "I will bring my father."

Signor Oloufa's father is his trump card, the ultimate menace, the special punishment reserved for me when all else has failed. Signor Oloufa's father is very old, very deaf, relentlessly garrulous, and so blind that he cannot move without a guide, and therefore cannot leave me until his son comes to fetch him. Moreover, our only common tongue is Arabic, which he speaks with an accent, which I can comprehend only with great

difficulty. On this occasion, however, I was fresh from England and I did not quail.

"I shall be delighted," I said firmly, "to greet your father."

Signor Oloufa fetched his father. He placed him carefully in a chair and shouted at him in Italian. He then shook his fist at me and departed. I gave Signor Oloufa *père* coffee and a cigarette, and shouted at him in my Arabic, which he understands as little as I do his.

"Welcome to my office!" I roared. "I have just told your son that I will not reduce the rent."

But Signor Oloufa *père* is an amiable old man and had not come to argue, but to tell me everything he knew. He waved my words courteously aside and addressed me interminably and incomprehensibly for an hour and a half, by which time his son had rightly estimated that I should be half insane. After this interval, accordingly, Signor Oloufa *fils* returned.

"*Alors*," he said, putting his head menacingly round the door, "the reduction? My father has convinced you?"

But, although near despair, I was determined not to give in.

"By no means," I replied. "Your father is a very reasonable man. We have agreed that the foolish and immature demands of his son are unworthy of the consideration of experienced persons."

Signor Oloufa glared at me and shouted at his father in Italian.

"Bah!" he said with contempt, "again you joke in the English manner. My father says that you have already agreed to a reduction of fifty piastres."

"*Jamais de la vie!*" I replied. "Your father has misunderstood me. I said an increase of a hundred piastres."

Signor Oloufa looked at me in sorrow and consulted his father at some length in Italian.

"*Enfin*," he said at last, "my father and I are men with noble minds. We disdain to bargain. But we need a new partition in our office. You will pay for this and, for this year, we will say nothing about the rent. It is agreed?"

I looked wearily at Signor Oloufa. I was suddenly tired, discouraged, decadent, democratic. It was agreed.

MATIÈRE INFLAMMABLE

In Cairo it is the prudent custom of Insurance Companies occasionally to inspect the premises which they have insured, and a few weeks ago my firm's building underwent its customary examination. From long familiarity I had come to regard these periodic visitations as a mere harmless formality, so when the representative of the company demanded an urgent personal interview, I received him with surprise and misgiving.

"Monsieur," said the representative, looking very grave, "there is a matter to which I must call your immediate attention. In cellar No. 4 is stored a consignment of boot polish and this polish is of a type considered by the law as a *matière inflammable*. Your present policy, monsieur, does not permit the storage of *matières inflammables*, and if there is a fire the company will not be responsible."

I gave the matter my immediate attention and discovered that the harbourer of boot polish was no less a man than my tenant Signor Oloufa, a Roman citizen whose relations with me are constantly in a state of tension. Wishing devoutly that it had been any other tenant, I invited Signor Oloufa to my office and explained to him the views of the insurance company.

"I regret it infinitely," I said, "but the boot polish must be removed from the building."

MATIÈRE INFLAMMABLE

Signor Oloufa, as I had expected, was furious.

"This is an outrage!" he shouted. "I hire a cellar to store my goods and now you say the goods may not be stored? It is monstrous, unheard of!"

"You have not understood," I replied patiently. "Listen. The boot polish is a *matière inflammable*. If it remains the landlord's insurance policy is no longer valid. Moreover, the insurance policies of all the tenants are equally no longer valid. Your own insurance policy, signor, is no longer valid."

"My own insurance policy?" cried Signor Oloufa, thunderstruck, "but this is a scandal! It was your duty to tell me this before." He considered the situation rapidly. "*Enfin*," he said, "there is only one thing to do. You must at once tell all the tenants what has occurred. You must also, *evidemment*, agree to pay all the extra premiums which the insurance companies will require. In this way only can the matter be regulated."

"It is an excellent idea," I replied with contempt, "and I wonder that I did not think of it before. I will pay the premiums and I will add the amount to the rent which you pay for the cellar."

Signor Oloufa could not believe his ears.

"*Comment?*" he said, "you will add the amount? You expect me to pay your premium and the premiums of all the *canaille* in the building? *Jamais! mais, jamais!*"

"As you please," I replied. "You agree, *alors*, to remove the polish?"

"I agree to nothing!" shouted Signor Oloufa, in a rage. "Here am I, the oldest tenant, the most faithful,

the most long-suffering. And I may not store goods in my cellar. It is not to be borne!" he stormed, rushing towards the door. "I will leave the building! I will write to the Directors! I will consult my lawyer!"

To be on the safe side I also consulted my lawyer. My lawyer is Italian. He was very pleased. He said he would assign Signor Oloufa *en référé* and have the boot polish forcibly removed. I was much relieved; but I dislike extreme measures. I thought I would try a little more appeasement. Holding my lawyer in reserve in the next room I invited Signor Oloufa once more into my office.

"Listen," I said conciliatingly, "the matter of the boot polish becomes increasingly grave. It appears that the law takes so serious a view that I have but to assign you *en référé* and the polish will immediately be taken away. That is a course," I added with deprecation, "which I should be most reluctant to pursue."

"It would be useless," said Signor Oloufa automatically; "to keep the polish is my sacred right. Nevertheless," he paused and smiled the open-hearted smile of a Roman who is about to make a generous concession, "to please you and because my character is noble, I will remove it. I will store it elsewhere, but you, as is only just, will pay the extra rent. This," he added threateningly, "is my last word."

I saw that appeasement had failed. Shrugging my shoulders I opened the door and admitted my lawyer. My lawyer wasted no time. He aimed his forefinger at Signor Oloufa as if it had been a revolver, and addressed to him in Italian a rapid flow of what I took to be menaces and insults. Signor Oloufa's face lit

up. He aimed his own forefinger at the lawyer as if it had been a machine-gun and replied with what sounded like a torrent of abuse. After half an hour the combatants wiped the perspiration from their brows. They bowed coldly to each other and Signor Oloufa left the office.

"*Alors?*" I said gloomily to the lawyer, "he will not listen? We must, after all, assign him?"

"*Mais non!*" replied the lawyer in surprise, "he has freely agreed to remove the boot polish. All that was needed," he added, lighting a cigarette, "was a little tact."

7. THE PEOPLE

THE DOG-BITE

MISFORTUNES, even in Egypt, seldom come singly, but Ahmed is noted for them in his village, as another man might be for avarice or cunning. So when to the ill luck of an addiction to cocaine he adds that of being bitten by a mad dog, it causes the satisfaction proper to events which happen in accordance with general expectation. "Ahmed has been bitten," say the villagers, as one might say of a shower, "Ah, it *looked* like rain."

The only persons, besides Ahmed, who are displeased by the occurrence are the District Health Officer and the village policeman—the former because Ahmed will have to be sent to Cairo for treatment, and the latter because he will have to be arrested first. Ahmed, who has foreseen the unwelcome benevolence of the authorities, increases the policeman's displeasure by hiding himself, and when he is eventually discovered among the cotton sticks on a neighbour's roof the policeman's patience has worn very thin. He strikes Ahmed on the face, rebukes him most sternly for attempting to resist the law, and leads him before the Health Officer. The Health Officer also strikes Ahmed on the face, as custom demands, and enlarges.

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upon his ineptitude in being bitten, and thus causing trouble and expense to the Government. He then sends Ahmed, under escort, to Cairo, where he is treated at the hospital. In due course Ahmed returns to his village and finds that not only has he been cured of his bite, but that a miracle has happened. He no longer craves for cocaine. As the local vendor of drugs charges an exorbitant price for his wares Ahmed's opinion of mad dogs goes up, and he urges his fellow addicts to seek one out. They, however, argue that mad dogs are not available every day, and that the Health Officer will no doubt be equally satisfied with the bite of an ordinary dog. They accordingly display themselves invitingly to the village dogs, and talk cheerfully of the journey to Cairo. But the village dogs are suspicious of these unwonted attentions. They withdraw uneasily into corners, and can by no means be induced to take advantage of their opportunities. The addicts are in despair. They revile the dogs and loudly lament their inability to be bitten. But their lamentations reach the ear of the village barber, who is a man of resource. He observes their distress with a calculating eye, and mounts the jaws of a dead dog upon a pair of tongs. He then confers secretly with the addicts, and bites them with the tongs for an agreed price. The addicts go joyfully to Cairo, and the fame of the barber spreads to neighbouring villages.

At length, however, the Health Officer becomes seriously displeased. Not only has his arm become fatigued by the despatch of so many victims to Cairo, but he has received an official letter, commenting unfavourably upon the increase of cases of dog-bite in his



"... and bites them with tongs for an agreed price"

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district. He sends for the policeman. "How does it come about," he says wrathfully, "that the country-side is infested with mad dogs, while you sit in the café?" The policeman is indignant. "Do I not," he says, "patrol the district both by day and by night, without taking rest? There is, *wullahy*, no mad dog!" But the Health Officer will not listen to argument. Where there are bites, he maintains, there are mad dogs, and where there are mad dogs there are stupid and idle policemen, unworthy of their positions.

The policeman goes to his friend the barber, and after they have talked of this and that, he confides to him the unjust conclusions of the Health Officer. The barber sees that further biting is likely to be unprofitable and even dangerous. He strokes his beard and expresses his opinion that there is more in the matter than meets the eye. Then, after casting about in his mind for a suitable method of freeing himself from any blame, he says that he himself, out of his great affection for the policeman, will study the phenomenon, intimating that in the meantime the policeman should remain inactive, lest suspicion be prematurely aroused. The policeman, whose brain is unfitted for the solution of mysteries, agrees to leave the case in the barber's hands, and holds out the promise of an adequate reward if his efforts are attended with success.

The barber now bethinks him of Ahmed, among whose misfortunes is included a foolish faith in the good intentions of his fellows. He seeks Ahmed out and, addressing him as an equal, begins to say, as if for the sake of conversing, that the administration of dog-bites is arduous work for an old man, and to lament that he

THE DOG-BITE

has no sons of his own. Ahmed is delighted to have the confidence of the barber in a matter so intimate as paternity, but his mind is limited to the comprehension of direct statements. So the barber goes on to say that after much thought directed towards the choice of a successor in the business, he has been unable to find a young man more worthy, both by the moderation of his conduct and the virtue of his character, than Ahmed himself. Ahmed at first cannot believe his ears, but when the barber actually presents him with the tongs and his blessing he becomes almost mad with joy. He rushes out into the street and proclaims so vociferously that it is he, and he only, who now possesses the magic tongs which can send a man to Cairo, that it is scarcely necessary for the barber to point him out to the policeman. But his arrest causes no surprise. "Ahmed is in prison," say the villagers, as one might say of a fine day, "Ah, it *looked* as if the sun would shine."

THE LOTTERY

Ahmed is commonly unfortunate. So consistent is his ill-luck that he has even lost his taste for gambling, finding the sport to include no element of chance. It is natural, therefore, that when the village policeman is commanded to sell tickets for the Egyptian State Benevolent Society Lottery he should compel Ahmed to take two.

"Do not despair," he says consolingly as Ahmed reluctantly parts with a week's income, "consider that there are only fifty thousand tickets to be allotted and your chances of winning a hundred pounds are therefore comparatively rosy." The policeman pats Ahmed genially on the back and dismisses him.

Ahmed, however, is not reassured. He returns to his hut and mourns loudly, throwing dust over his head. His neighbours attempt to console him, but as they are all ticket-holders themselves their sympathy is tempered by a feeling that his distress is premature.

The wheels of Government turn slowly. When the list of prize-winners in the lottery is eventually placed outside the police station, so great a period of time has elapsed that its significance is not immediately apparent to the villagers, and it is regarded askance as a record of the names of malefactors. Not until its intention has been explained by the policeman do the ticket-

THE LOTTERY

holders gather eagerly round. Their village is not widely represented on the list. But among the winners of smaller consolation prizes there is one familiar name. Ahmed has won five pounds.

The villagers rub their eyes. They send for the professional letter-writer that their error in reading the name may be corrected. The letter-writer reads the name from all angles, with his glasses and even, as a last resort, without his glasses. Incredibly it remains Ahmed. Ahmed himself is dumbfounded. He goes about in a dream, and it is only on the second day that he begins to receive the congratulations of his friends with a proper nonchalance and to think of adding the descriptive title *El Ghani*, the rich, to his name. He then buys a few ornaments and a pair of brown and white leather shoes on credit, pending the payment of the five pounds.

If the villagers are surprised at Ahmed's good fortune the headman and the policeman, themselves disappointed ticket-holders, are seriously displeased. It is evidently grave negligence on the part of Providence that the worthy should receive nothing and even contribute to the bounty showered on the unworthy. They conspire together to discover a means of redressing the balance, and when night has fallen the headman leads away his donkey and secretes him in a field at a distance from the village.

The next morning he goes publicly to the policeman. He casts his turban to the ground and shouts dolorously that his donkey has been stolen. In cases of theft or other misdemeanour Ahmed is arrested as a matter of course, and it is with the full approval of

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the villagers that he is brought by the policeman before the headman. The policeman kicks Ahmed.

"Why, son of a dog," he says fiercely, "did you steal the donkey of the honourable headman?"

"*Wullahy!*" says Ahmed, trembling deferentially. "I did not steal the honourable donkey of the respected headman." The policeman strikes Ahmed on the face.

"Father of lies," he shouts, "we have proof that you stole the donkey. Will you aggravate the crime by putting us to the trouble of hiring witnesses?" The argument continues until Ahmed at length wearies of repeated denials.

"*Al' Allah,*" he says, raising his hands resignedly, "if the donkey is stolen and the noble policeman says it was stolen by me, it is evident that I stole it."

"Of course you did!" replies the policeman triumphantly.

The headman now holds up his hand for silence.

"Though it would be only right," he says with a gentle melancholy, "to send this Ahmed for trial at the Assizes, yet, as the donkey was my own donkey, I will temper justice with mercy. Are not the men of this village to me as well-beloved sons? We will therefore consider that this Ahmed has not stolen the donkey, but has rather purchased it from me, and though the donkey should properly be valued at ten pounds I will, as Ahmed is a poor man, accept only five. Let Ahmed therefore sign the receipt from the Benevolent Society, and let him in the future scrupulously keep the law."

Ahmed departs with relief that matters are no worse, but the villagers are astonished to see him so soon at liberty.

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"What is this!" they ask him, "are you now so much the darling of fortune that even the theft of the headman's donkey carries with it no penalty?"

"Not so," replies Ahmed, "I did not steal the donkey, but I have paid five pounds for it."

This news reaches the ears of the man who had sold Ahmed the ornaments and the brown and white leather shoes. He rushes upon Ahmed and seizes him by the throat.

"Villain!" he shouts, "pay me what you owe!"

"Alas," replies Ahmed, "the honourable headman has taken the five pounds and I am now a poor devil. How can I pay?"

The ruthless merchant takes Ahmed before the headman and states his complaint.

"Thou ingrate!" says the headman to Ahmed in sorrow. "Is this the manner in which you repay my clemency?"

As Ahmed is led to prison the headman passes him on the road. Ahmed notes with resignation that he is riding his donkey.

THE PAINLESS EXTRACTION

In Egypt there are two reasons for spending money. There are the satisfactory disbursements on wedding festivities and ornaments, which magnify the spender in the eyes of his neighbours; and there are the sums paid with reluctance and shame to doctors and creditors, as the only remaining means of compounding with ill-health or the law.

Guergis Effendi is not going to be married. Neither is he contemplating the purchase of conspicuous adornment. But he is suffering severely from the toothache. He has tried every means of ridding himself of his affliction. He has recited the relevant charms suggested by an elderly relative; he has attempted to concentrate his thoughts on pleasant or edifying matters such as food and philosophy; he has even incurred the expense of a sleeping draught. But the pain continues unabated and eventually he resigns himself to the necessity for paying for professional assistance.

In Cairo there are two dentists, Dr. Ahmed and Dr. Hafez, who live in the same street. Guergis Effendi goes to Dr. Ahmed and explains his trouble. Dr. Ahmed examines the tooth.

"My friend," he says, shaking his head gravely, "this tooth is in a very bad state. There is no means of filling it. It must come out."

THE PAINLESS EXTRACTION

Guergis Effendi grips the sides of the chair.

"Oh, sir!" he stammers, "an extraction is a thing I had by no means anticipated."

"Do not be alarmed," says the dentist soothingly, "for an extra charge of only fifty piastres I will give you cocaine and you will feel nothing."

This additional expense has not entered into Guergis Effendi's calculations and his first instinct is to protest vehemently. The sight of the forceps, however, causes him to think better of it and he obediently opens his mouth. Dr. Ahmed administers the cocaine.

"This will take a minute or two to become effective," he says laying down the needle. "Do you sit still for a moment and I will take the opportunity of going to the telephone."

Dr. Ahmed goes into an inner room and leaves Guergis Effendi to grieve over the extra fifty piastres which his tooth is unexpectedly costing him. He searches in his mind for some plausible means of evading the imposition, and as he sits he has a sudden inspiration. He remembers the fortunate proximity of Dr. Hafez and rapidly calculates that he still has some ten minutes before the cocaine entirely loses its effectiveness. Dr. Ahmed is still occupied with the telephone and Guergis Effendi rises from the chair and creeps unobserved from the house. Once in the street he runs at full speed to the apartment of Dr. Hafez.

By good fortune the doctor is disengaged.

"Doctor," says Guergis Effendi, "I have a tooth to be extracted."

The doctor examines the tooth. "Yes," he says,

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"it certainly must come out. I will give you some cocaine. It will cost you fifty piastres extra."

"Doctor," says Guergis Effendi loftily, "do not trouble yourself. It is not necessary."

"But the extraction will be very painful!" cries the dentist in astonishment.

"Never mind," says Guergis Effendi, looking at his watch with a shade of anxiety, "I will bear the pain. I am not a child." He lies back calmly and opens his mouth. The dentist extracts the tooth and looks at Guergis Effendi with admiration.

"My friend," he says, "allow me to congratulate you. Moreover," he adds a trifle regretfully, "you have saved yourself fifty piastres."

Guergis Effendi is about to make a modest rejoinder when the telephone bell rings.

"Excuse me for a moment only," says the dentist, going to the instrument which stands in the corner of the room.

At the other end of the line is Dr. Ahmed and his tone is one of urgency and indignation.

"Listen!" he cries, "I have been the victim of a swindle of an impudence unparalleled! A client came to me for an extraction. I administered cocaine, and during my temporary absence from the room the villain left my *clinique* without paying. It has just occurred to me that the miscreant might intend to complete his business with you. His appearance is evil beyond belief, and if such a fellow presents himself it will be well to send immediately for the police."

Dr. Hafez recalls the unusual courage of Guergis Effendi.

THE PAINLESS EXTRACTION

"*Wullahy!*" he cries excitedly, "such a man sits at this moment in my room!" "Aha, malefactor!" he shouts, turning round in righteous indignation, "so you are the robber who would deceive my honourable colleague!" He begins to advance across the room with arms outstretched to seize Guergis Effendi by the throat. But suddenly he is stricken motionless. The chair is empty.

8. HOLIDAY

THE EIGHTH PLAGUE

WHEN Mary and I went on a holiday to Palestine, we went in the hope of finding solitude. We are not unsociable people—indeed we rather like our fellow mortals—but even to the most gregariously inclined there must come at times a longing to spend a day in the country alone. And in Egypt it is not possible to be alone. There is a plague of small boys in the land. It may be contended that small boys are harmless and even necessary, that they should be regarded, if not with love, at least with tolerance. But in Egypt one is incessantly attended by small boys, one is continually subject to the unflagging zeal of small boys to obtain something for nothing, and one is unable to find any place in the country where there are no small boys. Mary and I had grown to detest small boys.

Palestine, as compared with the Nile Valley, appears to be a wild and inhospitable country, and as we drove our car over the hills between Jerusalem and Tiberias we conceived the hope that we might be able to have lunch by the road-side. In Egypt, of course, a picnic is unthinkable, and the memory of a few distressing and abortive attempts made us scout the idea at first as hare-brained and fantastic. Nevertheless

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we toyed with it for several miles and eventually a particularly lonely and pleasant spot tempted us to stop the car.

But we might as well have been in Egypt. Small boys had appeared almost before we had sat down. We drove on. Solitude would clearly have to be sought in a manner more cautious and subtle.

We reached Tiberias hungry and despondent. As we lunched morosely at the hotel we grieved over our folly in having come to Palestine at all. But when we looked at the hills which surround the Sea of Galilee our hopes revived. Of all hills in the world these are the most barren and desolate, and we thought to ourselves that if solitude had any local habitation in the Near East it would be found on the summit of one of those hills. We spoke casually with the proprietor of our hotel on the subject of the hills, and he agreed that they were lonely. We asked him conversationally if many people were in the habit of climbing them. This idea was evidently new to him. He looked at us in dumb astonishment, as if doubting our sanity, and then decided that our question was just a silly English joke. No, he said, tolerating us, nobody ever climbed the hills. Mary and I retired to our room and considered the matter. We suggested to each other that it would be simply idiotic to climb a hill in Palestine at the end of April. We decided to climb one the next day.

In the morning we set off. We carefully avoided the hill nearest to Tiberias. We also refrained from tempting Providence by carrying sandwiches. We walked two miles down the road till we reached a place where neither human being nor human habitation was in

THE EIGHTH PLAGUE

sight. Then we looked furtively about us and struck off on tiptoe towards the foot of our hill.

The day was oppressive and the sun blazed down on us. Neither of us was in training for a climb and the hill was much higher and steeper than we had expected. We toiled on over loose stones and through prickly bushes. We grew exceedingly hot and there was no shade anywhere. Had it not been for the thought that when we reached the top we should be safely and indisputably alone at last nothing could have induced us to proceed.

After more than an hour's climbing we sank exhausted on the summit of our hill. I lit my pipe and we settled down to enjoy the view. It was very peaceful and very silent and there was a cool breeze. I was just admiring the distant prospect of Mount Hermon and saying complacently, "Well thank the Lord there aren't any small boys *here* at any rate," when Mary suddenly gripped my arm and pointed down the slope. Far below, so small that it looked like an ant, a tiny figure was moving. It was very far away, too far, we assured each other hastily to have the remotest interest in us. Still we watched it with a kind of uneasy fascination. It grew a little larger and certainly seemed to be coming in our direction. We said with assumed lightness that it was probably some herdsman on his way to his flock, but already we were seized with a vague foreboding and a chill was creeping about our hearts. The figure toiled slowly up and gradually assumed a definite form, the familiar and abhorrent form of a small boy. We watched it in gloomy silence, still cherishing a foolish hope that it might

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possibly have some objective other than ourselves. But when it reached us it was at once evident that its goal had been achieved. It sat down a yard or so away. It said no word, it just sat there, patiently expectant, waiting to see what we would do next. Well, there were only two things to do. To remain where we were for the rest of the day in order to prove that we weren't going to do *anything* next, or to go away. We chose the second course. Sadly and in silence we rose to our feet and started down the hill, and with quiet alacrity the small boy rose to his and followed us.

In the near East it is not possible to be alone.



“... waiting to see what we would do next”

